

The Spartan Protocol

by Kamen Rider Gaim

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Summary: The war is all but over. The Master Chief and Cortana have finished the fight and plan to return to Earth with new Forerunner resources at their disposal. But a slipspace anomaly sends them into a new universe where they will encounter an enemy far older and potentially more dangerous than the Covenant ever were. Master Chief/Tali

1. Chapter 1

Disclaimer: I don't own anything concerning Halo or Mass Effect in anyway

I was inspired to write this after reading "Mass Effect X Halo Spartan Dawn" by Freedom Guard, arguably the best writer of Halo crossovers on this site. With his permission, I have taken a few parts from that story and implanted it into my own. However if you've read his story, you'll see where mine diverts from his.

I finally decided to re-upload this story, after playing through the entire series again. I couldn't stand the ending ME3 had, even with the extended cut, so I will be fixing that properly. I know Halo 4 is out, but this will totally ignore that plot. I will however, be implementing a few weapons from that game into this story with information from the halo wikia.

* * *

><p>"Chief? Chief! Can you hear me?"</p>

Slowly, but surely, John blinked open his eyes and saw a faint blue outline a few feet in front of him. With the stubborn determination unique to Spartans, he shook his head clear and saw Cortana looking over at him worriedly.

She sighed in relief, as she saw him finally coming to. "I thought I lost you too."

John raised an eyebrow beneath his helmet. "Lost me too? What do you mean?" The words died in his throat as he gazed up and saw the vast darkness of open space where he should've seen the other half of the Forward Unto Dawn. He blinked slowly, trying to comprehend what he was seeing.

"What happened?" he asked, as he pushed off the bulkhead towards the gap, and looked out into the space outside.

Cortana was silent for a full three seconds before responding, something that had John slightly worried. "I'm not sure. When Halo fired, it shook itself to pieces. It did a number on the Ark, and the portal couldn't sustain itself. We made it through just as it collapsed."

She turned to glance out through the gaping hole where the ship was cut completely through. "Well, some of us made it!"

He stared out, trying to determine their location, but saw nothing recognizable. There was a planet off in the distance, but the distance seemed far too great for their half-ship to make, even if they did have working engines.

"But you did it." Cortana added, as her Spartan floated towards the cryotube, hoping to provide him with a silver lining. "Truth and the Covenant|the Flood. It's finished."

John nodded solemnly, as he pulled the rifle off of his back and set it on the weapon rack beside the cryotube.

"I'll drop a beacon, but it'll be a while before anyone finds us. Years, even." Cortana warned softly, watching his every move with concern.

John pulled open the tube and climbed in, looking at Cortana forlornly. Logically, he knew it wouldn't be much longer until Cortana reached the end of her operational life expectancy, and would go rampant. However, he wouldn't accept it as reality until he was actually confronted with the proof.

"I'll miss you," she said, her voice filled with deep genuine emotion born from the bond of trust and care she shared with her Spartan.

"Wake me when you need me." With these parting words, John closed the door around him, allowing the cryo sleep process to begin. His eyelids grew heavy, his thoughts slowed to a crawl, and finally, he drifted off into unconsciousness.

Cortana stared at his still form a few moments longer before she got to work. She set about activating the distress beacon, broadcasting it repeatedly on an unencrypted COM channel.

Next she prepared herself for data storage. This was the AI equivalent to cryo sleep, and the only way to prolong her time before rampancy set in. They could be adrift for ten minutes or ten years before they were found, and it would only be an instant for her and

the Master Chief. Even then she knew he'd need her again, and then the countdown would begin once more.

She was scared of being deleted, but she was even more scared of what harm she could cause John once rampant. She'd force him to do what was necessary, as she knew he'd be especially stubborn on this front.

That made her smile.

Her hologram powered down and was stored back into her data chip, as she waited for someone to heed her call.

* * *

><p>With the Forward Unto Dawn's engines severely damaged, it was left to drift aimlessly with the momentum it had from passing through the portal. However, as the months passed by, the aft section of the former frigate drew ever closer to the distant planet the Master Chief had spotted. Cortana's passive scanning detected rapid movement closing in on the ship, prompting her immediate reactivation.

She powered up the long range scanners to get a better read out on what was coming and saw five sentinels. However, these were not the same models encountered on any of the halo installations they had been on. These sentinels were sleek, heavily armored, and had at least triple the firepower compared to the other models, if the large cannons on their undersides were any indication.

This was trouble. It would likely only take one of those to tear the ship apart. However, she noted that there were no shields on any of these models. Trading shields for more armor and heavy-duty weapons? That didn't sound at all like the Forerunners' train of thought when making these things.

She started the process of thawing out John and ran through the ship's systems searching for something, anything that could get them out of this mess. There was nothing. So instead, she diverted power to the long range scanners and focused on the planet they were approaching, rather than the sentinels that were now spreading themselves around the ship.

She idly noted that John had woken up and stood beside her, staring out at the planet they were approaching. "Cortana, what's our status?"

She smiled and turned to face him, staring into the bright golden visor of his helmet. "Oh, you knowâ€|same as usual. We're outgunned, outnumbered, and likely about to die."

John turned and grabbed the MA5C off the weapon rack, ejecting the spent clip and slapped in a fresh one, as he walked back over to her side. "What are we dealing with?"

Cortana, meanwhile, had been doing rapid fire calculations and compared the distance to the planet with the current structural integrity of John's MJOLNIR armor. John had told her that he'd plummeted through the Earth's atmosphere and survived. Perhaps if she could provide a suitable distraction, he'd be able to repeat the

performance.

However, before she could get a word in edge wise, the sentinels fired. John braced himself for the inevitable attack, but felt no change to the ship. He looked to Cortana for an explanation, a movement so ingrained into his instincts that it made her smile warmly at him.

"The sentinels aren't equipped offensively like I thought. Those large beams attached to their underside are portable shield projectors. I'm assuming they're designed for capture and containment of Flood specimens. Look outside."

He glanced at the gaping hole in the ship and saw a faint blue barrier sealing it up. The two looked on as the shields began to show the effects of entering the atmosphere of the planet before them. They quickly realized that the sentinels were using their shield projectors to safeguard the ship from the heat of re-entry, as was evident by the red glow the shields had taken on instead of their normal blue. This told them that they were being brought down to the surface for a reason, however what that reason was, they weren't sure they wanted to know.

* * *

><p>As they descended closer to the planet's surface, Cortana and John were astounded by the sights they were witnessing. It was a large untouched Forerunner city. Considering how old it likely was, and the pristine condition it remained in, this may have been the last physical evidence of the Forerunners in the galaxy that was still being actively taken care of, if the hundreds of thousands of sentinels flying above it was an indication.</p>

The sentinels carrying the Dawn set them down carefully on a landing pad and flew off into the city, easily getting lost amongst the others. Cortana turned to John and smiled. "Well, we were invited in. Let's not keep our hosts waiting." With that said, she returned to her chip, which he then pulled out and inserted into the slot on the back of his head. There was a familiar cold rush like mercury, a sharp stab of pain, and then the warmth of her return.

"Ahâ€|still plenty of room in here." Cortana joked.

John shook his head with a small smile on his face, as he checked his belt pouches and found he still had three plasma grenades and one M9 HE-DP left. The EMP from the plasma would come in handy should the sentinels turn hostile, while the M9's larger lethal radius would be able to catch more of them in its blast.

He stepped up to the edge of the ship and peered outside, readying his rifle. The nearest building was a good 100 yards away across open ground. Considering nearly every building and structure was white or silver, he in his military olive green MJOLNIR would stick out like a sore thumb. "I'm sure Kelly could've made itâ€|" John muttered under his breath.

"No, I don't think so. In this instance, speed would not be a contributing factor towards our survival with so many sentinels here. However, your abnormally high luck might be. Lord knows you've escaped tougher messes. And in case you forgot, we have no ship, thus

we have no escape. If we can find a hangar, we might be able to grab a ship and hightail it back to FLEETCOM HQ."

He glanced at his motion detector and noticed there were no red or yellow blips on it. It showed all clear. That just meant the sentinels hadn't decided whether or not to attack him yet. "Finding a ship is a good start. We'll work out the minor details after that."

Without another moment of hesitation, he dashed out of the ship sprinting across the open ground towards the building in front of him. He saw many sentinels turn towards him, but none of them made to move closer or attack. As he was about to reach his destination, a monitor came flying out and stopped before him. It was a midnight black with two gold lines running across its sides, and instead of the blue or red eye he'd seen on Guilty Spark, this one had a dark violet eye.

He kept his MA5C trained at the Forerunner monitor and hoped that this was not going to end in the same fashion as before. His MJOLNIR needed a serious upgrade and a lot of repairs despite the fact that it looked intact, so he knew that if he got into a fight again, it wasn't going to end well for either him or Cortana.

The monitor hovered closer and from its eye produced a wide blue beam that scanned him from head to toe. Apparently it had found what it was looking for, as it started speaking to him in a variation of Latin. Now more than ever, he was grateful for Dā©jā's many lessons in world languages, the first of which was Latin. He responded to the greeting and switched languages to English immediately, following a hunch that this monitor could and would adapt to the language switch.

The Monitor was silent only for a moment until it spoke again though this time it was in English and in a very respectful tone.

"Acknowledged, identity as Reclaimer has been confirmed. Welcome Reclaimer, to the home world of my makers, the Forerunners. I am Command Monitor 726, Redeeming Prosperity. How may I be of service to you?"

John narrowed his eyes in suspicion, as his finger hovered over the trigger tentatively. The memory of Guilty Spark's 'cheerful' demeanor, and how well that had panned out for him and Cortana was burned into his mind. No, he wasn't about to take a chance quite yet, however he still needed information. So long as this monitor wasn't hostile yet, it would likely provide any information he requested of it.

"What is this place?" John asked.

"Your confusion is understandable Reclaimer, as you are the first of your kind to arrive here. This planet is the home world of my makers, and this location is the main command center for the war against the Flood."

John heard Cortana chuckling, and he could almost see her shaking her head. "It's like I saidâ€|only your luck."

"This is the Forerunner home world?" John asked doubtfully.

"Indeed! The heart of the war between my creators and the Flood was waged on this world. Admittedly, the world was lost briefly; however it was reclaimed shortly before the firing of installations 01 through 07 no less than 100,000 years ago. With the final battle won, every one of my creators that survived, having sought refuge within their shield worlds, returned to this planet to purge it of the Flood corruption.

Only once they were sure their home had been cleansed, did they begin work on rebuilding its splendor and reseeding the galaxy with life from the DNA samples collected in advance. With life well on its way to beginning again, I was created to help maintain order and given command of the facilities here to provide assistance to the Reclaimers, should they manage to find their way here."

John hesitated momentarily, before pulling his finger off of the trigger and lowered his MA5C. This one seemed sane enough to help them out. Not to mention that, if its word could be trusted, that was its primary function.

Looking out over the facilities, he was amazed at how civilian it looked. Any UNSC military base that was deemed important enough to be called a command center for the war against the Covenant wouldn't have nearly half this much. The massive towers dwarfing over the smaller domed buildings were not only unnecessary, but easily seen from a distance, something that should be always be avoided. Still, he couldn't deny the beauty of their architecture, as every building he saw was in and of itself, a masterpiece to behold.

John was drawn out of his thoughts by a pained cry coming from within his head. Cortana's pain filled scream filled him with anguish, and was loud enough to hurt his ears. He grasped his head and fell to one knee, trying to ignore the pain while his other hand reached up to pull her out.

"Hang on Cortana. Store yourself now." John ordered worriedly.

Redeeming hovered lower to glance at his head, speaking with what might pass for worry in its voice, "Reclaimer, is everything alright? Please inform me as to what troubles you."

John pulled out Cortana's chip, which was tinged with the slightest bit of red on the edges of her normal blue. He had no idea what Gravemind had subjected her to, but knew it likely sped up the rampancy process. He cursed himself for leaving her behind with that monster, and knew for his own peace of mind, it was better he was kept ignorant of the exact details. "Cortanaâ€|is entering the first stages of rampancy."

Redeeming scanned over the chip in his hand and made the sound of a clicking tongue in disappointment. "You should not have waited so long to bring this to my attention Reclaimer. Your construct is dangerously close to the end of her operational lifespan and, under normal circumstances, would be subject for termination. However, worry not for the technological improvements made after the war ensures she can be repaired, and even improved upon."

John glanced at the chip in his hand that held one his greatest friends, the one person he trusted above possibly all others. He looked up at Redeeming's glowing eye and nodded.

"Do it."

A golden-blue light shot out from Redeeming's eye and surrounded Cortana's chip, lifting it into the air, as he started moving into the building, John following close behind. He was led into some sort of modified refit and repair workshop, with hundreds of Huragok scattered around working on various pieces of equipment he couldn't identify.

John followed Redeeming into a large room with clear glass walls and a large console in the center, into which the monitor inserted Cortana's chip. Suddenly, the sound of whistling filled the air as Redeeming communicated to the Huragok in their form of oral language, calling in twenty of the engineers.

Immediately they began inputting commands into the console, bringing up a diagnostic report on Cortana's chip on the screen. Apparently the information they received, for better or worse, was extremely interesting to them. They started chirping rapidly, their tentacles dancing across the controls, rotating the image of her chip and breaking the diagram up into every minor component.

John instantly spotted where the rampancy had begun and spread to amongst the various components, the dark red glow covering them the final evidence of how close she had come. Her memory pathways, storage banks, logic systems and finally her higher processing functions all had signs of damage and deterioration. Individually each section only had minor damage, but altogether it was enough to stress the boundaries of Cortana's limits.

Redeeming hummed in thought and turned to face John. "Your construct is damaged, but this is easily reparable. To ensure there will not be a repeat of this incident, she will have to be upgraded to the most recent standards my makers set when creating their monitoring units, the ones used for my creation in fact. This will eliminate the possibility of "rampancy". It will also extend her operational lifespan to an approximate 7500 years. I am sure this will be more than adequate for your needs?"

John stared at Redeeming Prosperity momentarily before looking at the Huragok who were working, quite eagerly it seemed, to save his dearest companion. All UNSC 'smart' AI were guaranteed to hit rampancy after seven years of active service. To hear that was no longer true, that Cortana had a chance to survive unhindered for up to 7500 years, was the best news John had heard in a very long time. "What other standards are set for Forerunner AI?"

"Our higher processing capabilities are far superior. I do not mean to offend, but in the time it took your construct to complete an all systems check on a standard Class-Three cruiser, I would have done the same thing, and coordinated navigation, firing solutions, and attack plans for an entire fleet. Rest assured, your own will be able to accomplish this and similar feats, as well."

John's eyebrows rose in shock. If Cortana, or any UNSC AI really, had been capable of that, then the space battles against the Covenant

might have been more in their favor. Especially if someone like Captain Keyes had been the one to create the attack plan that was to be implemented.

"Go on." John prompted, his interest piqued.

Redeeming bobbed silently in the air for a moment. "Her memory pathways and information storage capabilities will be increased by a factor of 5000, naturally her data cell will have to be upgraded to compensate. I will of course leave her core personality as it currently stands. I believe that is the one aspect your kind has succeeded where my creators failed."

John smiled as he nodded in agreement. Cortana was, much like Athena the Greek Goddess of wisdom, spawned from the mind of Dr. Catherine Halsey, creator of the Spartan II program, and developer of the MJOLNIR armor system. She was a mother to all the Spartans and the only person, aside from each other, that could identify them while they were in armor.

A low beeping sound drew his attention back to the Huragok, watching as they took the new, much larger chip from the console and inserted it into the holopad. John and Redeeming both headed into the room and stepped up just as Cortana's holographic visage appeared before them, smiling brightly.

"How are you feeling, Cortana?" John inquired.

She looked down at herself, running her hands down her sides slowly before looking up at him once more. "Like you wouldn't believe. I feel better than when I first came online. I'm thinking much faster, and all the data from Halo, the Ark, the Flood, it's all been compressed. It's not even taking up one percent of my memory storage. I've also learned some new tips and tricks for stealing secrets and being in places I shouldn't be," she finished mischievously.

John thought he understood that last bit, but needed confirmation. "Her insurgency software and security skills have been upgraded as well?"

"But of course! As I have stated to you previously, she has been upgraded to meet the standards set by my creators. Nothing less than the best is acceptable." Redeeming confirmed proudly.

"Now, on to other matters. First, I believe we must find a suitable combat skin for you, Reclaimer. A Class 2 combat skin is highly outdated, and its usefulness has long since passed. It was the first combat skin created in response to the discovery of Virulent Specimen L-094, codenamed: the Flood. Its predecessor was little more than an environment suit with no combat potential for use in hazardous areas.

My creators were forced to implement many changes and improvements with each new model to meet the rapid adaptability of the Flood. The Class 12 combat skin was the lowest grade deemed acceptable for combat against them. However, I am sure you will settle for only the best. Naturally, this means we will have to prepare the Class 18 combat skin for your usage." Redeeming stated.

John turned to face Redeeming and nodded in thought. "Guilty Spark

did say I should be using at least a Class 12 combat skin when he led me through the library on Halo. What makes this Class 12 so unique that it's the lowest acceptable armor grade?"

"Why that would be because of its material composition and unique shielding system of course," Redeeming answered jovially. "The material that made up this armor was a prototype nanotechnology-membrane composite. It was so advanced that it could, if given enough time, repair itself of any damage taken, due to the millions of nano machines that made up the membrane. In addition, the armor was plated with a dense metallic composite, similar to the alloy used on the ships and structures designed by my creators, though understandably weaker due to weight.

Finally, the Class 12 models were equipped with a more powerful shield than the Class 11, which also acted as a radiation shield and provided the ability to lockdown shields. A back-up instantaneous shield generator was also equipped to provide another layer of shielding as soon as the primary shield failed, leaving no rest period where the user was vulnerable. Essentially, these improvements were designed to counter the probing attacks to the nervous system the Flood infection forms utilized."

John was painfully reminded of the one close encounter in which, a flood infection form had managed to get its chemical filled, needle sharp penetrator through his suit and into his neck. Had it not been for Cortana's assistance, he would not be standing here today. "I can see where that might be useful."

Cortana tapped her chin in thought, as she took in the conversation so far. "Thanks to the repair and upgrades, I've been able to access some files that Dr. Halsey stored in my memory. There are schematics and details for all new armor and weapons exclusive to Spartans, Chief. She wasn't kidding when she said you were going to be the best of the best, though she may have taken the Greek Pantheon theme a bit too far."

"What do you mean by that?" John asked.

"Well, the next series or armor upgrades after the MJOLNIR Mark VI starts the ATHENA armor line. More emphasis has been put into the systems to enhance your body, adding to what your augmentations already improve, you really would be the closest thing to a Greek god among men. Oh and let's not forget the weapons. There is the "ARTEMIS" sniper rifle, named after the Goddess of the Hunt, and the "ZEUS" Light Support Weapon, which is an electromagnetically charged directed energy weapon."

John's eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline. The last time he had seen Dr. Halsey was when she had taken Kelly and whisked her off to an unknown location. Could she have taken Kelly to retrieve the completed versions of these new additions to the Spartan's arsenal? "Cortana, when were these plans added to your memory banks?"

"No record found for their addition. She must have had that information erased." Cortana closed her eyes and silently fumed that information had been denied to her. "It had to have been at a point she had contact with me, so my best guess would be prior to the assault on the Unyielding Hierophant."

John nodded, as that fit in with his own conclusions. "Will you need my armor now to construct the new model?"

Cortana and Redeeming turned to face each other, having a silent conversation between the two of them, and turned back to face him together. "No, that won't be necessary. With the resources available to us here, we can make the ATHENA from scratch using the plans I've got, and the materials Redeeming can provide. As you know, the Dawn's armory was lost with the other half of the ship, leaving you with nothing but that old rifle of yours. We'll create and develop the weapons in the plans to remedy this. After we're done we'll draw up plans for the new supercarrier. Nowâ€"

"Wait, a supercarrier? Why do we need a ship that large?" John asked in confusion.

Cortana smiled sheepishly as she answered him. "It was aâ€|personal ambition of mine to be in control of one of those eventually. And let's face it Chief, whatever ship you arrive back at FLEETCOM HQ with, is the ship they're going to let you remain in command of, considering all you've done. Why not take the best of the best?"

John adamantly shook his head. "We don't need a ship that size. At most, we can do with a destroyer class ship. It's like you said, with the resources available here, you and Redeeming could probably design and create a ship that can outlast and out-shoot a supercarrier anyway."

"Wellâ€|I suppose that's true. And a destroyer class ship that can take down Covenant capital ships and flagships could gain a reputation quickly." Cortana muttered, thinking it over. "Alright, I can accept that. Now, Redeeming is there anywhere the Chief here can seek medical treatment while we design and create his new suit and toys?"

Happy to be included into the conversation once more, Redeeming replied, "Certainly! There is a medical and surgical center near the center of the facility. Simply head there and allow the medical units to perform their tasks. Is there anything specific I should alert them to focus on, construct?"

She hummed in thought, before snapping her fingers suddenly. Her body flickered between dark blue and green for a moment, before reverting to her natural purple.

A moment later, Redeeming's eye glowed green before reverting to its natural color. "Ah, your orders have been received and transmitted to the medical units. They will heed them explicitly, though I must say I am impressed that you were able to find the information on this treatment so quickly. Have you been searching through the system databanks the entire time? That is most impressive. You will be a force to be reckoned with, should your enemies try to hide information from you."

John moved to object, but Cortana and Redeeming tuned him out, already engaged in an in-depth conversation about repairs and upgrades to various things. He shook his head and walked out of the workshop, heading to the center of the base where he found the white domed building adorned with the symbol of a blue cross and two green

comets swirling around it. It seemed, regardless of color, a cross with two green symbols around it was a sign for the medical division. Perhaps the Forerunners had never heard of or seen a snake. Or they just might not have thought a poisonous reptile was something to be associated with good health.

The first thing he noticed as he walked in, was that there were only four surgical stations in total. If this truly was the only medical station on this base, as he believed it to be, then four stations was dangerously inadequate, especially in times of war as the Forerunners had been in. Though he supposed, someone infected by the flood wasn't going to be brought back to the base anyways.

Next, he noticed the wall mounted charging stations for, what he assumed were, medical versions of standard sentinels. Rather than the usual beam weapon, these had what appeared to be smaller surgical lasers, mechanical claws for gripping, and extendable limbs with attached syringes. The sight unnerved him slightly, but the treatment he was going to receive had been specified by Cortana; and he trusted her.

When he stepped up to the side of one of the surgery tables, the sentinels came out of standby and hovered around him. "Please remove your combat skin Reclaimer, and the sentinels shall begin your treatment," Redeeming said, his voice projected through the sentinel directly in front of him.

John started the process of removing his armor, stacking it neatly on the provided cart, and lay down atop the table. Above his head, a mask lowered from the control system, covering the lower half of his face, and administering anesthesia. The last thing he saw before passing out, was the sentinel insert its syringe into a container containing a dark red liquid, filling it up completely.

* * *

><p>John slowly blinked his eyes open, wincing at the intensity of the lights in the room. He sat up and looked down, noticing that the myriad of cuts, bruises, plasma burns, and other injures from his time fighting were gone. Even scars he'd had since his initial Spartan training were gone. Could the sentinels really have been so efficient?</p>

"The sentinels weren't the ones who did that you know."

He turned to his left and saw a holopad with Cortana standing there, arms folded across her chest, and a relieved smile on her face. "How are you feeling?"

John flexed his arms and opened and closed his hands repeatedly. "Better. No pain, no aches, and no scars. How was it done Cortana?"

She held up her right hand and a fully 3D, life-sized image of his body appeared in the room before him. He noted it was an x-ray scan, as he could see his internals, and narrowed his eyes when he spotted saw patches of darker red, the same color he'd seen before he succumbed to the anesthetics, flowing through him alongside the lighter red of his blood. "What is the dark red I'm seeing?"

Cortana turned to face him and smiled proudly. "Those are a grand total of fifty billion nanites running through your body. They're the pinnacle of medical technology, and were created at the end of the war. Unfortunately, by that time, it was already too late to use them to help save the lives of infected Forerunners."

John turned back to his x-ray scan and saw the patches of dark red in his head, arms, legs, and chest, where the biggest concentration was. "These things can counteract a Flood virus infection?"

"They can. They can also treat any internal injuries you receive, such as repairing potentially lethal damage to your organs. Their operational lifespan is about seventy-five years, give or take five years. The moment you die, so do they, though they're going to try their best to prevent that from happening. To start with, they're currently repairing broken down cell tissue and spawning new ones."

John's eyes widened as he turned to her for confirmation. "They're trying to halt my aging?"

She scoffed derisively. "Trying? Please, give them some credit. They've already succeeded. What they're doing now, is restoring your body to peak efficiency. I set the command for twenty-four years of age. That sounds like a time when you were in your prime. Once their seventy-five years are up though, they will disintegrate and your aging will resume again, starting from age twenty-four."

"What else can they do?" John asked.

Cortana took a moment to compose herself before answering. "They bolster your immune system, filtering out any viruses, diseases, poisons, or toxins that may enter your system. I've also instructed them to remedy a certain unfortunate side effect from your augmentations. Your suppressed 'sex drive' is slowly being brought back up to normal human standards. And by normal, I mean the men who aren't pigs. It's got to be a gradual process or the overwhelming time spent suppressed may react detrimentally. Twenty years of reduced hormones coming out in a single instant could be bad, especially for a Spartan. So you're going through a second puberty essentially."

John frowned in annoyance and sung his legs over the edge of the operating table. He noticed his old MJOLNIR Mark VI armor was nowhere in sight, but spotted a set of ODST military fatigues that probably came from the remains of the Dawn, and donned them quickly. He turned back to face Cortana once more and asked, "Any reason why you felt this was necessary?"

"Eventually, the UNSC will win against the loyalists. Unlike the beginning of the war, this time we outnumber them. With the majority of the Sangheili on our side, we are at least the technological equals of them. We will win this war. But what will you do then, Chief? When a time of peace is reached, who will you have left to fight? There may be another human civil war, but likely not something a Spartan would be called in for. You'll need a life Chief, a real life. That means a wife, and a son or daughter you can raise to continue the Spartan line. Let's face it, you're quite possibly the best and last Spartan. A child sired from and trained by you, is going to be one hell of a soldier."

For a moment, John let the thoughts of raising a family fill his head. He, his wife and child would be fighting together in a battle for the UNSC, perhaps serving on the same ship. He shook his head and cleared the thought away. The increased hormones must have started affecting him. "I admit, it sounds ideal. But there's a war to be won first. I'd also outlive anyone I chose to be with."

She waved her hand dismissively. "We'll have a nanite injection dispenser installed on the new ship. But, you've been out for almost a full month; twenty-two days to be exact, though I suppose time means little to you right now. Your new ATHENA armor is ready. Do you feel up to getting them, or would you rather wait until morning?"

"I've had enough rest for a while. Let's go see what you two have been up to." Her image disappeared, and he exited the medical building, heading back to the workstation he had last been in a month ago.

As soon as John walked in, he saw a metal pedestal with a circular barrier surrounding it, which had not been there before. This, he assumed, was where his new armor was being held.

Cortana's image reappeared on the holopad beside the pedestal, while Redeeming Prosperity circled around from behind the display and waited on the other side. "Chief, say hello to the ATHENA Powered Assault Armor." She waved her hand, and the circular barrier began descending into the pedestal, revealing his new suit.

It resembled his old MJOLNIR armor, though with a few slight differences. It was no longer military olive green, but now a rather dark forest green instead. There were thicker armor plates, and they covered more areas that had been left open to the black armored bodysuit before. In his search for the smallest of details and changes, he noticed two small openings on the top of each wrist.
"Walk me through what I have here Cortana."

"I'd be glad to." Cortana stated eagerly. "The ATHENA's armor is composed of a combination between Titanium-A salvaged from the Dawn, and ENDES Ceramic Skin alloy, taken directly from the Class 18 combat skin. The suit features full-body integration with a neural uplink via the helmet. This ensures full synchronization with the armor and not only allows you to move as if unhindered while wearing it; it also makes instantaneous reaction timing a possibility, via the reactive circuits and the force-multiplying circuits. At the exact second you think something, it happens, and to the degree that you want as well. Your old reactions will be akin to moving through water compared to now."

Let's seeâ€|your old fusion reactor that powered the MJOLNIR has been replaced by something the Forerunners called a Trinity Star reactor. This is a system of three smaller hard-light fusion reactors working in tandem to power your new shielding system and armor functions. Your armor now starts off with an overshield for a total of three shield layers, and the recharge times are light years ahead of where they were. Time delay from shields dropping under fire to beginning of recharge cycle is a three second delay. Time from fully depleted to fully charged, is nine seconds, with the three second delay first, followed by the two seconds needed to charge each layer.

Factoring in the actual strength of your new shields, the fact that they have three layers, and a vastly shorter recharge time, I'd have to say that overall, your new shields are about a hundred times better than that of the MJOLNIR Mark VI. Considering that was the standard for Class 18 combat skins, it makes you wonder how bad the Flood was then, compared to when we encountered them the first time."

John, despite his amazement at the new armor, suppressed a shudder running down his spine. The Flood numbers back then must have been past the hundred millions. After all, the Forerunners were pressed to activate the Halo arrays, so even equipment like this wouldn't have been able to save them. "What else can it do?"

"Naturally, if your shields are depleted and you are injured, the armor has biofoam dispensers built into it to treat you until you can get proper medical care. There are stronger magnetic plates built into the suit, focused on the back, hips and upper thighs for you to carry more weapons into battle. A total of three weapons can be carried on the back, a weapon on each hip and one on each thigh. The suit also has jump jets built into the bottom of the boots, allowing for rapid maneuverability across terrain or sustained flight for sixty seconds. Not to mention it will help with movement in a zero-gee environment, for which you have a 120 minute supply of air." Cortana explained.

"I'm sure you've noticed the ejector ports placed on the wrists? Those contain extendable hard light energy daggers using Forerunner technology. They're thin, indestructible, and burn at least twice as hot as a Covenant energy sword; allowing it to slice or stab through a greater variety of materials.

Your suit is capable of utilizing shield lockdown, deploying drop shields and can emit sustained active camouflage, which cannot be neutralized by enemy fire or shut down from the heat of your weapons. You can also create an exact duplicate hologram, which I can take control of when inside your suit, to divert the attention of enemies while you flank around them. With the heightened synchronization of machine and mind, this will allow you to use these abilities with thought alone. Now I think it's time you were allowed to try it on."

John stepped up onto the pedestal, staring into the golden visor of his new helmet and smiled. He took his time, donning the new armor with reverence and respect. When he finally placed the helmet on, he felt something slide into the slot usually reserved for Cortana. Instantly the HUD powered up, and there was a faint whir from the Trinity Star reactors before they went silent. He felt the temperature within the suit regulate from hot to cold until it reached the perfect balance to keep him at a comfortable level.

He saw his shield beep three times, signaling the delay, until they started charging. Just as Cortana said, the first layer was filled in two seconds, and the next began its charge immediately after, with another time elapse of two seconds, until finally the last layer came online. The familiar blue, red, green display of an overshield cemented the fact that this was real and it was his. He just wished there were more Spartans left to receive the armor.

"Now, Reclaimer if you could retrieve your construct and insert her into your helmet's new port," Redeeming chimed in, having respectfully allowed Cortana to describe the details.

John pulled Cortana's chip out as it was ejected, and slotted it back into his head. Although this time there was no pain or cold mercury feeling, the familiar warmth returned as she was fully integrated once more.

"Mmâ€|this is much cozier. As you might have noticed, the neural uplink in your helmet enables me to come in more seamlessly, and integrates me with the armor like it does for you. The armor, you, and I are like our own Trinity system; three separate elements working together for a single purpose: the utter annihilation of the UNSC's enemies."

John wanted to get a feel for his new armor, and tried the same experiment Dr. Halsey had told him to do with his first set of MJOLNIR armor. He thought about moving his arm to his chest and saw it instantly move to do so, though without the overexertion that resulted in a hard smack the first time. He ran through a basic CQC routine and saw complete fluidity in his movements, while his speed now surpassed Kelly's.

"Calm down Chief, as I still have two minor things to explain before we're done here." Cortana said, slightly amused at what passed for excitement from John over his new armor. "Now then, the temperature control is constantly adjusted to perfectly counterbalance your own. Essentially, you're invisible to thermal imaging. And last, but not least, your suit is logged in as a destination on the slipspace transition grid. We've only built the input console so far, but we'll install that to the ship when it's completed. I will be able to access it directly even from in your suit, and can bring you to or from the ship, as well as bring things to you."

"What would you need to deliver to me from the ship?" John asked.

"I can do a weapon swap for you from the armory, or just provide you with an ammo resupply." Cortana answered.

John was impressed. That kind of functionality would be immeasurably useful on the battlefield. He could have the right weapon for the job at all times. Against foes like hunters, this could be a key factor in helping him prevent needless marine deaths. "By the way, are the new weapons done?"

"They are, and we've made more than enough should you choose to distribute some to other UNSC personnel you might be forced to bring aboard the ship, or see them destroyed in a fight. Redeeming, if you wouldn't mind opening the vault?"

"Of course construct, one moment please." Redeeming floated over to a panel, directly interfacing with the controls, which caused the wall to John's right to retract. Once the wall was gone, the room beyond was revealed, with racks and racks of weapons. He did a quick count and found ten of each type. It was more than enough to supply any potential teammates he might recruit, as a smaller unit would be more effective 95% of the time.

John entered the vault and inspected the various weapons as Cortana

ran through the specs for each one. Apparently they had done away with the old gunpowder and primer system, and gave each weapon a miniature gauss firing system. The rounds were now solid Titanium with a Tungsten Carbide tip rather than FMJ rounds, resulting in no shell casings and larger clip size. Besides the obvious increase in damage and stopping power, this led to greater firing range, higher ROF, and drastically reduced recoil.

Cortana had only chosen to create several varieties of these new UNSC gauss weapons, including: the M62 HBR, the CAWS automatic shotgun, the ARTEMIS sniper rifle, and finally the M739 Light Machine Gun. She had gone ahead and created the ZEUS directed energy weapon as well, in addition to recreating and improving upon the Spartan laser, the Fuel Rod Cannon, and the Plasma Launcher which could now fire five homing plasma grenades at a time.

Redeeming Prosperity had provided leftover hard light weapons from the Forerunner-Flood war to supplement the armory as well. These weapons fired projectiles composed of hard light that dispersed after impact, leaving no trace after an enemy was killed.

The Z-130 Suppressor was the Forerunner equivalent of the UNSC's MA5 line of assault rifles. Its automatic fire and extreme efficiency at close range, made the weapon a favorite of Forerunner troops during the war against the flood. It fired bolts of charged hard light that pierced and destroyed any organic material, and was markedly more effective at close range compared to its human counterpart.

The Z-250 Light Rifle was the Forerunner equivalent of his new M62 HBR combined with the Covenant Particle Beam Rifle, and also had a 36 round clip. The weapon fired three-round bursts towards the target, similar to the standard Battle Rifle, but also had an alternate firing mode which utilized single precision rounds that were vastly more powerful.

The Z-750 Special Application Sniper Rifle, also known as the Binary Rifle, was the Forerunners' primary long range weapon of choice. It included two core-mounted particle accelerators, with unparalleled stopping power to bring down distant foes with a single shot. According to Redeeming, an enemy who was killed by a shot from this rifle would disintegrate, due to the unique composition of the hard light projectile after passing through both particle accelerators. However, the sheer damage of the Binary Rifle was counteracted by its noticeably bright orange beam when fired, rendering it almost useless for remaining unnoticed. Then again, John realized that if he needed the Binary Rifle specifically, it would probably be at a point when stealth was no longer a concern anyways.

The Z-180 Close Combat Rifle/Asymmetric Engagement Mitigator, more commonly known as the Scattershot, was a prominent Forerunner weapon that was used for close-range defense toward the end of their war with the flood. While practically unstoppable up close, the most remarkable attribute of the Scattershot was its schismatic dispersal effect, drowning confined hard-surfaced interiors with brutal, ricocheting beams of energy.

The Z-110 Directed Energy Pistol, more commonly known as the Boltshot according to Redeeming, was the primary sidearm of the Forerunners during the war against the Flood. It had dual firing modes similar to the Covenant plasma pistol. It could shoot Magnum-like bursts or be

charged to fire a powerful hard light blast that consumed half of the 10 round clip. The latter was similar to a Shotgun's blast and nearly as powerful as well.

And finally, the Z-390 High-Explosive Munitions Rifle, better known as the Incineration Cannon, was the heavy weapon of choice for the Forerunners. Redeeming informed him that it was a highly destructive weapon that fired four streams of explosive particles in a tight spread, which released upon detonation in four different directions, before detonating again individually, increasing the effective radius of the initial explosion to varying degrees. Cortana chimed in and claimed that it mixed traits from a rocket launcher, a shotgun, and a flamethrower.

After fully inspecting and field stripping each weapon, Cortana informed him that it would still be another two months until the new ship was completed.

* * *

><p>While Cortana and Redeeming, as well as a large contingent of Huragok and sentinels, assembled their new ship, John spent the next two months putting his new armor and weapons through their paces. Redeeming had directed him to a combat training course the Forerunners had built, which consisted of a mile long labyrinth that contained sentinels armed to the teeth and a number of dangerous defenses and traps. He had faced almost every possible small scale Forerunner weapon inside that maze, and had several dozen variants of sentinels attack him through each run through.</p>

John had quickly learned the number one rule concerning that course: weapons or traps with similar appearances did not necessarily have similar damage outputs. He had seen the motion activated defense turrets mounted atop the corners of each turn in the labyrinth fire at him and were unable to inflict more than a few pinpricks of damage to the first layer of his shield.

However, the same guns mounted at mid-wall height had brought that first shield layer down by half. He supposed the guns were set to different outputs to reinforce the idea of constant vigilance. At one point, he had become so distracted by the attacking sentinels, that he had backed himself into a circular area with six wall mounted turrets, since they didn't show up on his motion detector. As a result, he lost all his shields. It was only his quick reflexes that had gotten him out of the area and back into the relatively safe corridor.

John had been able to test the shield lockdown against energy pulse rockets, the jump jets over trapdoors that held high explosive plasma mines at the bottom, and the deployable drop shield against a battalion of 17 simultaneously firing sentinels. All had met and surpassed his expectations, though the hologram he felt would only truly be effective against organic enemies rather than machines.

The weapon testing had impressed him greatly. Each weapon had decimated the sentinel forces that practically threw themselves into their own destruction. The HBR, the ARTEMIS and the CAWS had pierced straight through the shields and destroyed the sentinels instantly, while the M739 LMG was able to turn any corridor into a death trap, completely destroying anything that moved into its line of fire

without fail. The heavy weapons had completely obliterated any and all opposition in their path, and the new Forerunner hard light weapons destroyed sentinels left and right, their unique projectiles rendering enemy shields all but inconsequential.

As a personal challenge to himself, he had gone three run-throughs in the labyrinth using only his active camouflage systems and his energy daggers. True to her word, the cloaking systems had not deactivated upon the activation of his daggers or a successful kill as Cortana said they wouldn't. The daggers were not able to be camouflaged however, which meant they were to be instant use assassination weapons rather than prolonged cloaked combat weapons, and would have to remain sheathed until the moment he was in a position for the kill.

By the time Redeeming Prosperity had informed him that the ship was completed, he had finished 728 runs through the labyrinth and destroyed an estimated 6430 sentinels. Thankfully, the monitor was not angry or irritated. Rather, it cheerfully stated that he had bested the previous standard by 210%.

* * *

><p>John was led out to a massive ship yard which was empty except for the lone destroyer class ship awaiting them, though based on its size, it could have been classed as a carrier. He was handed Cortana's chip by Redeeming, which he quickly inserted into his helmet slot.</p>

"Hmmâ€œ| I must admit it's gotten _slightly_ more cramped inside here since the last time I was in here. Been doing some serious work, huh Chief?"

"I can't let you show me up too much." John retorted.

Cortana's voice took on a smug tone in her reply. "Oh, that's too bad chief, because once you see the ship we've built, christened the UNSC _Moonlight Shadow_, you'll be forced to concede superiority to me."

"We'll see. Now please proceed."

"Right. Now normally, a ship this size would most closely be identified as a carrier. However, the _Moonlight Shadow_ is 5km long, rather than a carrier's standard 3km. This is due to the amount of armaments we've stacked onto this ship, and the size of the hangar bay. Through a long, arduous process, we've managed to strip down a Forerunner Dreadnought, removed the engines, and implemented them to full capacity for our ship. And what I mean by full capacity is quite amazing. The Covenant used a Dreadnought as the power source for _High Charity_, and only used 10% of its total power output. With that comparison in mind, imagine how much more power we can use for the weapons, shielding, slipspace technology, and the other miscellaneous features."

John blinked, still trying to process this information. _High Charity_ was a massive 348 km long, dwarfing every known ship the UNSC had ever developed, including the supercarrier. The only thing that came close in size was the _Unyielding Hierophant_, and even that paled in comparison at a much smaller 30 km total length. And to

hear that said structure could be powered by only 10% of a Dreadnought's engines? He shook his head and tried to focus. He had to move on or he'd never stop thinking about it. "What's new about our slipspace capabilities?"

"Ah, well after showing Redeeming the data on slipspace I had, he was understandably disappointed and, to put it in simple terms, likened it to trying to cut through butter with a rock."

John paused at that information. "Well, the UNSC did have inferior capabilities in that department compared to the Covenant. What did he say about theirs?"

"Chief, that was what he said about their slipspace capabilities."

"Then what did he say about ours?"

"Replace rock with foot," Cortana stated in a deadpan tone of voice.

She then went on to explain that, while the UNSC slipspace travel was able to move at the speed of 2.625 light years per day, and the Covenant at the speed of 912.12 light years per day, the Forerunner slipspace drive was capable of the unimaginable speed of 2371.2 light-years per day. That meant near-instantaneous travel across the galaxy was possible.

"Think about it chief. If we push the engines to full power, we may be able to arrive at FLEETCOM HQ within days. I hate to say it, but this highlights just how lacking the UNSC Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engines really are."

"No. With loyalist forces still a threat, we're still under orders to follow the Cole Protocol. I'd suggest we make a jump to Reach, before sending a message to the UNSC alerting them of our arrival." John replied.

"Hmmâ€¦that sounds acceptable." Cortana conceded. "Alright, let's get on board and I'll tell you about the rest of the ship." Suddenly a glowing blue ring surrounded John, growing brighter by the second until it forced him to shield his eyes. When he was able to open them once more, he found himself standing on the bridge of the Moonlight Shadow.

"I see you got the slipspace transition system fully developed, though the light could be toned down a bit." John said, still trying to blink the spots out of his eyes. He held his hand over the controls and saw the blue light of Cortana pass through his gauntlet and into the system, her image appearing on the AI projector beside them.

"I'm still working out individual power outputs for various systems in the ship. Now I know the slipspace grid doesn't need that much." Cortana defended herself.

John took a seat in the captain's chair, surprised they had built one capable of withstanding his weight, and looked around the bridge, marveling at the view through the main window. He had believed it an extreme risk on the Pillar of Autumn, but he couldn't deny the

amazing views it provided. "Tell me about our weapon systems."

Cortana held up her left hand, bringing up a diagram of the ship and highlighted several sections in dark red. "We have not one, not two, but three MAC cannons on this ship. I haven't had them tested yet, but my predictions state that with the new engines pushing power to the more advanced magnetic coils, we can fire up to 5 shots consecutively from all three, though I'm positive there's no ship in the loyalist fleet that could withstand even half of that. We've got 100 Pulse Laser turrets, and 100 50mm HE turrets as our point-defense weapons, and they've been arranged to cover each other's blind spots." Cortana said proudly, as she had done the calculations for the point-defense guns herself.

"Moving on, we have 260 Archer missile pods, 130 on each side of the ship. There are 13 across and 10 down, with 30 missiles to a pod for a total of 7800 missiles. We also have four hard light torpedo tubes at the rear of the ship. Those things are really nasty. They're the fastest firing weapons on the ship, and upon impact, they shatter like infantry shredder rounds. Most of the time, they'll manage to pierce into the enemy's ship first, making the shattering effect that much more deadly, since it'll occur inside the ship. Who knows what they'll hit then? They could damage or destroy the engines, the life-support systems or maybe even rip the entire ship apart right then and there if it's small enough.

Last, but certainly not least, we've got 100 plasma turrets with their own set of magnetic coils separate from the MACs. This will increase accuracy and power of the shots to a precise surgical beam that can carve a ship in half. I believe you remember the results of my direct intervention with these weapons aboard the Ascendant Justice."

John did indeed remember the devastating damage far above the capabilities of what the Covenant could do with the weaponry. The plasma torpedoes the Covenant used from these weapons were powerful, but not necessarily able to take down a ship alone, as more than a few UNSC ships had survived several direct hits. Cortana's upgrades however, could and probably would, always gut a ship on the first shot.

"As for the defensive aspect, the armor plating on the ship is from the stripped down Dreadnought along with the remaining Titanium A from the Dawn. This ship can take quite a beating, but almost nothing is getting past the shields. Initial estimates show that the shields can withstand a direct hit from an ODP and still retain 75% charge."

That was quite impressive. Every single Covenant ship, bar none, hit by one of the ODPs around Earth was instantly destroyed. "You're really planning to settle into this ship, aren't you?"

"Damn straight I am. This is my new home, and I'm not letting any Covenant touch it." Cortana stated firmly. "Redeeming has supplied us with a complement of 3000 Huragok to help repair and maintain the ship, including keeping the weapons loaded."

John's head shot up suddenly at her claim. "Keeping them loaded? You expect the engineers to be capable of creating MAC rounds, Archer

missiles and 50mm HE rounds?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No, I expect them to operate and maintain the Forerunner material factories built on the lowest levels of the ship, which will create ammunition as we need it. We have two specifically made to keep the armory stocked with ammo, three for the MAC rounds, fifteen for the Archer missiles, and one just for replacement parts for the ATHENA armor system. This ship is now self-sufficient concerning ammo resupply, and the energy based weapons draw power from the engines."

John nodded in thought as he inspected the ship diagram Cortana still held in her hand. There were four sub levels devoted to the factories. The Archer units took up two levels, the MAC and armory units shared one level and the ATHENA unit took the highest of the sub-levels. "What about vehicles in the hangar?"

"We've created ten shielded Open Frame 92/Extra-Vehicular Activities, or Booster Frames as you know them. They've been modified to work in atmosphere as well as zero gee now. The unique Forerunner shields made specific for these frames creates a sealed environment for the driver. So while a pressurized suit isn't technically necessary to operate them anymore, it is highly recommended, as the shields can only take the equivalent of a single plasma torpedo before failing.

I had the primary and secondary nuclear fusion reactors taken out and replaced with Forerunner equivalents, which significantly decreased the charge up time for the M92 Principle Gauss Cannon and increased its power. Finally, we replaced the M41 LAAG at the rear of the frame with the M68 Gauss Cannon for greater firepower. Other than that, we left the twelve MITV pods and the two 80mm Ball-Mounted Rotary Cannons unaltered as they're perfect for this vehicle."

"How many pelicans have we got?" John inquired.

"We've only got three, so please try not to destroy them Chief. I try to give you only the best toys and you usually go and break or lose them. Anyways, I assumed with the addition of Booster Frames, the pelicans could be reserved for troop transport purposes. To that end, each one comes equipped with the troop deployment pods used during your earlier Spartan training, allowing the ships to carry up to 80 passengers. I can remotely pilot them myself, either from the Moonlight Shadow or from your armor."

"And single ship fighters? Did you make Longswords?" John pressed.

"No. We have a carrier size hangar, something unheard of and normally unnecessary for a destroyer. So, being the practical woman I am, I decided to fill it with Forerunner fighters. We have a total of fifty Stealth Assault Vehicles, or SAVs. They have a constantly active cloaking array around them that deactivates for a few seconds each time they fire their twin pulse cannons or hard light repeaters. By the time the enemy sees them, they'll already have done their damage, re-cloaked and moved on."

John was glad he had his armor on to hide his smirk. Cortana went all out to create herself a ship she'd feel pride and joy in controlling. Technically he could be called the captain of this ship, but Cortana

was the one in full control. He wordlessly stood up and stared out the window for several moments before turning to Cortana. "Are you ready to head home?"

She smiled and nodded. "I've been ready for a long time now. Slipspace coordinates have been set for Reach. Engines are powering up, and the slipspace drive is charging at 25% a minute."

John crossed his arms behind his back, right wrist holding the left, as he remembered his last visit to Reach. He remembered the one spot of untouched land on a devastated planet where he had found surviving Spartans, along with Vice Admiral Danforth Whitcomb, who was still one of the most inspirational and heroic people he'd ever served with.

"Chief, we have a problem." Cortana called out.

John snapped out of his thoughts and glanced over at his friend. "What is it Cortana?"

"The slipspace drive is exceeding maximum charge. Currently approaching 150% charge and climbing."

John rushed into action, sitting himself down at the weapons station and powered up the MAC cannons, trying to divert the power from the drive into the massive weapons.

"Power is locked in Cortana. I can't divert it." John informed her.

She nodded, as if expecting that answer. "I believe it's a safety precaution for ship to ship battles. We can hold the charge and be ready to jump at a moment's notice in case things don't go in our favor. Still, they shouldn't be able to surpass their maximum limit. Drive currently stands at 200% charge and holding."

John frowned. Something didn't feel right about this, and he had learned long ago to trust his instincts. "What will happen to us if we try to make the jump to Reach anyway?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never encountered a ship that had its slipspace drive over charged like this. My best guess is that because our coordinates are set for Reach, we'd arrive there through slipspace, but the extra power would want to keep our ship going forward without us putting in new coordinates. Needless to say, that could send us completely off course, maybe even to unexplored space. It could also potentially rip the ship in half."

"What options do we have?" Cortana crossed her arms across her chest and raised an eyebrow at him. "How lucky do you feel today Chief?"

That settled it for him. Cortana and Dr. Halsey had both said he was the luckiest out of all the Spartan IIs. It was time to test that statement. "Initiate slipspace jump to Reach."

"Aye aye, Chief." Cortana replied.

The massive ship lifted off the Forerunner home world and quickly left the planet's atmosphere, as Cortana confirmed their destination

for Reach. A massive slipspace portal opened before the ship, glowing bright blue in contrast to the darkness of space around it. Without hesitation, Cortana moved the ship into the portal which quickly collapsed behind them. "We are now en route to reach. ETA is two days."

"So far so good." John allowed himself to relax slightly and sat back down in the captain's chair, watching their travel through slipspace via the main window. However, it seemed he had spoken too soon, for not a minute later, warning lights began flashing on the navigations console. "Cortana, what's wrong?"

"The engines are overheating rapidly, and the reactors are actually struggling to diffuse it. Executing a slipspace jump after exceeding maximum charge on the slipspace must have overtaxed them. I estimate five minutes until critical engine failure."

John knew he would regret asking this, but he had to know. "What happens to the ship when we hit critical engine failure?"

Cortana frowned. "Under normal circumstances, we'd be dead in space. However we'd have the Huragok repair and refit them, and be back in operation within a few hours. However, if it occurred during a slipspace jump? Critical engine failure would destroy the ship."

"Can you abort the jump before that happens?" John asked seriously.

Cortana actually spent two seconds pondering that question, which was an unusually long time for an AI of her caliber, especially after the upgrades she had just undergone. "It's possible, but there's no telling how it could affect the slipspace drive or the engines. There's even a chance it could destroy the ship."

"If we don't abort the jump, the ship will definitely be destroyed. It's our only option." John countered.

Cortana nodded in agreement with his assessment and abruptly cut power running from the engines to the slipspace drive. The slipspace around them began warping and distorting rapidly, showing John just how unstable it had become without the slipspace drive sustaining it. He activated the magnetic plates on his back and feet to keep him in place as the ship rocked around violently within the slipspace field. Suddenly an exit portal was created in front of them, though it looked as if it would collapse at any moment. "Cortana, punch it."

"Engines are running hot. Exiting slipspace now!" Cortana exclaimed.

It was dangerously close, but the Moonlight Shadow managed to re-enter normal space just as the slipspace portal behind them collapsed, which would not only have destroyed their ship, but trapped the remains in slipspace. The shockwave from the portal's collapse impacted against their ship with tremendous force, and had John not been held in place at his seat, he would have likely been thrown clear across the bridge. John waited several minutes until he was sure things had calmed down and released his armor's hold on the chair beneath him and stood up. "Cortana, status?"

"Slipspace drive has ruptured, but the engineers are repairing it now. They'll be finished within the hour, but the engines are severely overheated and will run at half efficiency until the heat is fully dispersed. The reactors are working to speed this up, but there's no way around it. It'll take at least two hours before we have them running at their best."

John sighed softly to himself. "It could have been much worse, so for that at least, I'm thankful. Where did we exit slipspace?"

Cortana brought up a large three-dimensional view of the space their ship currently occupied with her right hand, and started scanning through star charts in the UNSC database that might match with her left hand. "Scanningâ€¦ no match found. Our location is not recorded in any UNSC archive. Not even ONI has a star chart of our location."

"Guess we're waiting for the repairs to be completed before trying to make the jump to Reach again. If we can spare the power from the engines, get the plasma turrets charged. I don't want to take the chance that we'll run into hostiles unprepared." John advised cautiously.

Cortana nodded, seeing the logic behind John's advice. "I've got five charging up at 7% a minute. All 3000 engineers have been sent to the slipspace drive to speed up the repairs. In addition, I've also diverted power from non-critical systems like the material factories and the cryo bay to the reactors, to drain the heat from the engines faster. We shouldâ€"waitâ€¦ picking up a distress signal."

That had John instantly on alert. "Is it from the UNSC?"

Cortana held up her left hand to her ear, as if trying to focus on what sounds she could make out, while waving her right hand in John's direction to shush him. Eventually Cortana let her hands drop and sighed. "Noâ€¦ distress signal is from an unknown human colony. Whatever frequency they were sending it on made it almost impossible to pick up, which would obviously defeat the purpose of sending a distress signal in the first place. I've managed to pick up the whole thing and cleaned it up a bit. Bringing it up for you now."

Cortana brought her hands up together and pulled them apart, creating a large rectangular holoscreen in the middle of the bridge. With a snap of her fingers, she played the distress signal she had received.

The video began showing human soldiers, though obviously not UNSC soldiers as their armor was vastly different, getting attacked by blue energy weapons. The energy weapons seemed similar, yet different from Covenant plasma, and that alone was enough to rule them out in John's mind. He'd seen plasma fired at him for the better part of twenty years, and he knew it well enough by now to recognize it instantly.

And apparently it was a helmet cam recording the distress call, as a female soldier, gunnery sergeant he mentally noted, came and pushed the camera down, avoiding what appeared to be a mortar round. The camera began panning erratically, and John was unable to see most of the video clearly, until a soldier, corporal he recognized, appeared

in the camera, speaking frantically. "We are under attack, taking heavy casualties! I repeat, taking heavy casualties! We can'tâ€|arghâ€|â€eed an evac. They came out of nowhere. We needâ€!" He was apparently shot in the back, as his body slumped over mid-sentence.

Suddenly, a loud humming blared through the video, causing the soldiers, to cease firing and look up in shock. The camera turned to the left sharply, and John was given a view of a large blue ship with four visible appendages, hanging down from the end like tentacles. The camera began spinning around even more wildly than before until the camera shut down in static.

"The feed cuts out after that. No com traffic, no distress signals, nothing. I've tracked the signal back to the colony and have its location in our NAV computer." Cortana said solemnly.

John instantly turned and started walking out of the bridge and towards the armory. "Set a course for the colony. Push the engines as hard as we can, but keep the plasma turrets charged."

Cortana set her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow, but did as he ordered. "What is it you plan to do? For all we know these could just be insurrectionists the Covenant loyalists have only recently found. Our priority is still to make contact with the UNSC."

"That wasn't the Covenant, of that I'm sure. And if the UNSC has no available data on this region of space, it's unlikely those were insurrectionists either. In short, there are humans being attacked by an unknown hostile enemy. I'm going in."

* * *

><p>This is STILL a Master Chief X Tali story, despite how many people are requesting other pairings or none at all.</p>

Yes, I have overpowered the ship, and John is going to shove a MAC round down Harbinger's throat.

As always read and review and point out spelling/grammar mistakes for me please.

2. Chapter 2

Disclaimer: I don't own anything concerning Halo or Mass Effect in anyway.

Unless I say otherwise, when I refer to Master Chief's shield(s) dropping, I mean just the first layer.

I've also gone back and added in a few new weapons in the first chapter, thanks to a suggestion by "TarakX". I took out the crappy SMGs and added in the LMG, a weapon much more suited to the Master Chief. I also added in the Forerunner Light Rifle, Binary Rifle, Incineration Cannon, and Scattershot.

* * *

><p>Commander Velana Shepard sighed softly, running a hand through

her dark crimson locks, as she headed towards the doors to the com room. The fire burning in her dark emerald eyes demanded attention from all around her. Many of the crew members were so intimidated, that they looked away until she had passed them by. 'The hero of the Blitz' they had dubbed her, for holding off a massive coalition force of slavers, crime syndicates, and batarian warlords single-handed, while giving her allies time to evacuate the wounded safely and bring in reinforcements. Personally, she didn't feel the necessity of accolades for her actions. All that mattered was she helped save many lives.<p>

As she drew closer to the com room, she spotted the medical officer, Dr. Chakwas, and Corporal Jenkins discussing what Spectres were really like. She calmly walked over to the pair, prompting them to face her with Jenkins dutifully giving her a salute, which she returned briefly.

"What do you think, Commander? We won't be staying on Eden Prime too long, will we? I'm itching for some real action," Jenkins exclaimed.

Dr. Chakwas turned towards the Jenkins and gave him the look that questioned his sanity. "I sincerely hope you're kidding, Corporal. Your 'real action' usually ends with me patching up crew members in the infirmary."

Velana nodded in agreement, looking at Jenkins seriously. "You need to calm down, Corporal. A good soldier stays cool, even under fire."

He shrugged casually, acknowledging her point. "Sorry Commander. But this waiting's killing me. I've never been on a mission like this before. Not one with a Spectre on board!"

She resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose in frustration. The only word that seemed to be on everyone's lips was 'Spectre'. At some point, enough had to be enough. "Just treat this like every other assignment you've had and everything will work out."

"Easy for you to say. You proved yourself in the Blitz. Everybody knows what you can do. This is my big chance. I need to show the brass what I can do!" Jenkins declared, slamming a fist into his open palm.

Oh great. Another of 'those' types. The young eager marine, ready to rise through the ranks and damn the consequences. She'd seen more than enough of those for her lifetime. "You're young, Corporal. You have a long career ahead of you. Don't do something stupid to mess it up."

Jenkins held his hands up in surrender at her slightly scathing tone. "Don't worry ma'am. I'm not going to screw this up."

"The captain's waiting for me." She nodded politely to each of them and brushed past them to the com room. She walked in and down the ramp to see the Turian Spectre, Nihlus, glancing at images of Eden Prime. It appeared that Captain Anderson wasn't here yet.

Nihlus heard her approach and turned around to face her. "Commander Shepard. I was hoping you'd get here first. It will give us the

chance to talk."

Velana was instantly on her guard. "What about?"

Nihlus began pacing back and forth slowly in front of her, appearing to look down at her rather than make eye contact. "I'm interested in this world we're going to â€“ Eden Prime. I've heard it's quite beautiful."

Figuring he was simply doing research before they arrived, she relaxed a bit. "They say it's a paradise."

"Yesâ€¦ a paradise. Serene. Tranquil. Safe. Eden Prime has become something of a symbol for your people, hasn't it? Proof that humanity can not only establish colonies across the galaxy, but also protect them. But how safe is it, really?" Nihlus turned his back to her, once more staring at the frozen image of the colony on the screen.

That set off warning bells in her head. "Do you know something?" she asked cautiously.

He turned around and met her gaze unwaveringly. "Your people are still newcomers, Shepard. The galaxy can be a very dangerous place. Is the Alliance truly ready for this?"

Just as she opened her to reply, Captain Anderson to walked into the com room and addressed Nihlus. "I think it's time we told the commander what's really going on."

"This mission is far more than a simple shakedown run", said Nihlus.

Finally having her suspicions confirmed, Velana turned to address the Captain rather than the Turian. "I figured there was something you weren't telling us."

He nodded in affirmation. "We're making a covert pick-up on Eden Prime. That's why we need the stealth systems operational."'

"There must be a reason you didn't tell me about this sir," Velana stated respectfully.

"This comes down from the top Commander. Information strictly on a need-to-know basis. A research team unearthed some kind of beacon on Eden Prime. It was Prothean." Anderson said, as he walked over to stand beside Nihlus, staring at her seriously to impress upon her the severity of the situation.

Now she understood. When humanity had first found Prothean artifacts on Mars, it had jumped their technology ahead 200 years. If they were sent to retrieve and deliver the beacon to the Citadel intact and undamaged, then they had to be expecting some resistance.

"Obviously this goes beyond mere human interests, Commander. This discovery could affect every species in Council space," Nihlus remarked.

She raised an eyebrow at that. Did they even know what this thing did? What if all they'd found was the Prothean version of indoor

plumbing? "I suppose it never hurts to have a few extra hands on board."

Nihlus shook his head slowly and said, "The beacon's not the only reason I'm here, Commander."

"Nihlus wants to see you in action, Commander. He's here to evaluate you," said Captain Anderson.

She glanced over to her right, where Nihlus now stood, and saw him nod in confirmation. "Guess that explains why I bump into him every time I turn around," she commented lightly to Captain Anderson.

He looked at her pointedly and walked over to stand before her. "The Alliance has been pushing for this for a long time. Humanity wants a larger role in shaping interstellar policy. We want more say with the Citadel Council. The Spectres represent the Council's power and authority. If they accept a human into their ranks, it shows how far the Alliance has come. Earth needs this Shepard. We're counting on you."

"So, no pressure right?" Velana joked.

Nihlus raised his hand in a calming gesture. "Don't worry Commander. Eden Prime will be the first of many missions together, in order for me to evaluate your skills."

Captain Anderson, deciding it was time to get down to business, cut in before Nihlus could elaborate any further. "You'll be in charge of the ground team Shepard. Secure the beacon and get it onto the ship ASAP. Nihlus will accompany you to observe the mission.

Now this she could handle. Just another routine pick-up mission. Her eyes took on the glint unique to a hardened soldier as she nodded. "Just give the word Captain."

"We should be getting close toâ€¢"

"Captain! We got a problem" Joker cut in over the intercom.

Anderson frowned. Joker wouldn't have interrupted unless it was something that demanded his immediate attention. "What is it Joker?"

"Transmission from Eden Prime, sir. You better see this!" Joker replied.

"Bring it up on screen." Anderson ordered.

The three of them turned to stand before the projector as the distress call from Eden Prime started playing. The video started off by showing Alliance soldiers taking fire from blue energy weapons. That in itself was odd to Velana, as she couldn't think of anyone who used energy weapons off the top of her head.

And apparently it was a helmet cam recording the distress call, as a female gunnery sergeant came and pushed the camera down, avoiding what appeared to be a mortar round. The camera began panning erratically, and she was unable to see most of the video clearly, until a soldier, corporal she thought, appeared in the camera,

speaking frantically. "We are under attack, taking heavy casualties! I repeat, taking heavy casualties! We can'tâ€|arghâ€|â€eed an evac. They came out of nowhere. We needâ€!" He was apparently shot in the back, as his body slumped over mid-sentence.

Suddenly, a loud humming blared through the video, causing the soldiers, to cease firing and look up in shock. The camera turned to the left sharply, and the three of them were given a view of a large blue ship with four visible appendages, hanging down from the end like tentacles. The camera began spinning around even more wildly than before until the camera shut down in static.

"Everything cuts out after that. No com Traffic at all. Just goes dead. There's nothing." Joker piped in over the intercom.

The Captain narrowed his eyes in thought momentarily before responding. "Reverse and hold at 38.5."

The video rewound itself and froze at the image of the large blue ship. From what little she could see of it, Velana thought it resembled a giant claw reaching down towards the colony to grab something. She glanced at Nihlus from her peripheral vision, and saw him staring at it just as intently as she was.

"Status report!" Anderson demanded.

"Seventeen minutes out, Captain. No other Alliance ships in the area. There was a large blip on our scanners, but it disappeared not a full second later. Haven't picked up another reading since then. Considering the Normandy is the first to have IES stealth technology, I ruled out the possibility of it being another ship. Could be wreckage from reinforcements."

That didn't do anything to help the Captain's nerves. Rather, they confirmed his suspicions that someone else had come for the beacon. "Take us in Joker. Fast and quiet. This mission just got a lot more complicated."

Nihlus considered the situation carefully before offering his suggestion to Anderson. "A small strike team can move quickly without drawing attention. It's our best chance to secure the beacon."

"Grab your gear and meet us in the cargo hold." As Nihlus headed out to get ready, Anderson turned to Velana, who had not taken her eyes off of the frozen ship image yet. "Tell Alenko and Jenkins to suit up, Commander. You're going in."

* * *

><p>John grabbed the CAWS, setting it horizontally across the back of his waist, and the HBR, which he set on the right side of his back. After a moment's consideration, he grabbed the ARTEMIS and set that on the left side of his back. He was sure he'd find a good use for it.</p>

"Chief, I've prepped a pelican for your use. There was another ship that entered the system a few moments after us as well." Cortana said through the ship's intercom system.

John paused in his grab for ammo clips at her words. Another ship

entered the system moments after them? That meant, provided they had their com channels set to pick up all unencrypted signals, they received the distress signal as well. "Status?"

"They're headed to the colony as we speak. They seem to have some sort of cloaking system as well. Their ship is as cold as space to our thermal sensors, but their engines are running hot. We picked up their power levels pathetically easy. And thenâ€"! They had the gall to try and scan us! I'm sure you know me well enough by now, to realize I wasn't going to let that insult stand. Forerunner cloaking field is active and running at 100%."

John shook his head, a wry grin on his face. Cortana was very competitive, and never liked anyone thinking they could best her in anything. He added five clips for the HBR to his belt pouches, and hooked two quick-reload drums for the CAWS and the ARTEMIS onto the left and right side of his ammo belt. Finally, he grabbed four plasma grenades and stored them in a pouch on his right hip.

He stepped out of the armory and saw the familiar blue motes of light denoting that the slipspace transition system was being used. One bright flash later, and he was standing in the hangar looking at a Pelican with its engines running hot. As he climbed into the Pelican, he felt compelled to ask, "Cortana will you be able to manage the ship and get me down to the surface as well?"

John heard Cortana scoff through the dropship's speakers as if he had just questioned her ability to perform basic addition. "Naturally. My new capabilities ensure that, even when inside your head, I'll be able to micromanage the finest of details for the ship. Covenant cruiser arrive in-system? No problem. I can eliminate it at the same time I'd be telling you to make a left at the brute you just killed."

John stayed silent, but was impressed. He was now starting to fully understand how much improvement had been made to Cortana's abilities. The Pelican lifted off and headed out of the hangar, descending towards the vibrant planet below them. "How long until we reach ground?"

"ETA is sixty seconds." Cortana responded quickly. "So, you haven't told me yet what it is you plan to do."

John thought about it rationally for a moment. "Unknown hostiles are attacking a human colony we have no knowledge about, in a system none of the UNSC star charts match. First things first, I need to evaluate the situation and identify the hostiles. Do you have any ideas about the energy being used in the video?"

"I can't be certain from a secondhand source like that, but from the evidence we've seen it seems less potent than plasma. It also seems a bit more inaccurate. I don't think we're facing Covenant here Chief." Cortana concluded.

John nodded slowly, though having her confirm his suspicions wasn't much of a relief. At least the Covenant were a known enemy. He was going into a fight with no intel support except a frantic marine's video cam. It felt like he was watching Jenkins die all over again.

It wasn't long before the dropship entered the atmosphere and was holding just off the ground. John held his hand over the console, pulling Cortana back into the chip in his head, before climbing out. He watched as the pelican ascended up through the atmosphere back to the Moonlight Shadow until he was finished.

As he looked around, John noted that the area around him seemed extremely sparse. He could see faint signs of civilization off to the east, but it looked lacking compared to other colonies like Sigma Octanus IV. He set a NAV marker at its location to mark his target, and nodded to himself when he saw the familiar orange triangle and distance displayed.

He pulled out his HBR, clicked off the safety, and started heading through a copse of trees towards the marker, but crouched down as he spotted a small group of troops moving south. He zoomed in with the scope built into his HUD and found that the troops were bipedal machines. Their entire bodies were made up of dull blue metal plates connected by wires and cables. The rifles they carried were likely the energy weapons he'd seen fired, though they looked rather bulky and awkwardly shaped. They had no defined facial features, save for a glowing eye built into a curved head. "Cortana, any input on those things?"

"Afraid not Chief. I've never seen them before. At least we know for sure they're not Covenant. They do all their own fighting, even the grunts. And, let's not forget the most important part; these are likely AI combat units."

John blinked in shock at her words. "AI? Each one of those things is an AI?"

"They'd have to be. I'm not detecting any signals coming into the area, so they're not being controlled remotely. It also makes more sense for a soldier like this to be able to think for themselves, rather than relying on someone else to give the programmed commands, as there will inevitably be a time delay."

John hefted his rifle and centered the 'head' of one of the soldiers through the scope. He took a breath and pulled the trigger, blasting the head off in a shower of sparks and shrapnel. It seemed Cortana was right in her analysis about them being AI, as the remaining five soldiers turned to face him in unison and started firing. He managed to get behind a tree, but not before his shield took several direct hits. When he spared a moment to glance at his shield bar, he found that only about 5% had been drained. "Cortana, is this accurate?"

"Hmmâ€| seems so. Now that I know what we're working with a bit better, I can form an accurate comparison. The speed of the individual shots is noticeably faster, though the rate of fire is much lower. They don't even burn half as hot as regular plasma, and the accuracy is variable it seems. All in all, nothing you can't handle."

That's all John needed to hear. He set the HBR on his back and pulled out the CAWS, activating his active camouflage in the process. He waited another second and stormed out of cover and down the path. Seeing as the soldiers were sweeping the area looking for him, it seemed as if they relied on visual images rather than some sort of

motion detector to locate their targets. Well, that suited him just fine. He crept down silently to the group's left flank, and blasted straight through the chest cavity of the soldier in front of him.

As soon as it fell, the remaining four turned to his location and started firing rapidly. Realizing that staying hidden was pointless now, he deactivated his suit's camo and started weaving through the shots, occasionally taking hits to his shield. He got up close to the one on his left, and slammed the butt of his shotgun into the metal plate on its chest, caving it in through to its back. He didn't bother watching it drop as he fired into the head of the next, blowing it off and showering him in heated sparks.

At this point, he crouched and took cover behind a rock, his shield had dropped to 90% from continuous fire. "Cortana, you didn't mention their weapons don't overheat."

"How would I have known that without seeing them in action? And besides, it's not that they don't overheat; it's that they seem to have a greater firing capacity before it happens. As long as you don't stand still in front of a firing line like an idiot, I don't think you'll be taken down by these things."

He grunted in annoyance, and peeked around the cover, blasting off the legs of the soldier he could see, and finished it off with a blast through the head as it was falling. The last soldier stopped firing momentarily, and started backing towards the trees. John narrowed his eyes. Seeking cover against a superior enemy? Well, at least it wasn't stupid.

He pulled out a plasma grenade, priming it in his hand, and tossed it over the rock, managing to stick it onto the thing's head. In one bright blue flash, the soldier was blasted to pieces that rained down over the area briefly. John fanned his shotgun around the area searching for more hostiles, but his motion detector read all clear.

"If this is all they've got Chief, I think you could sweep the colony clean yourself." Cortana assessed.

John crouched down and scanned the body of one of the destroyed soldiers. Through the hole in its chest, he could see its internal components and systems, many of which seemed extremely advanced. "Cortana can you get anything from this thing?"

He held his right hand over the hole, the pulsing blue light surrounding it indicating Cortana was in. Almost instantly his gauntlet glowed blue once more, signaling her return. "What did you get?"

"Not as much as I'd hoped, but more than I expected. Apparently these things are called 'Geth' and were searching for some kind of beacon. I tried searching for more, but these things seem to have a fail-safe mechanism. Their memory banks are erased upon their destruction, but that still takes about a minute. I got in quickly and managed to get at least this much. Any longer, and I'd have risked being deleted as well."

John nodded in relief that she hadn't taken an unnecessary risk. "We've got enough for now. No need to try and scavenge data from them

again."

Cortana smiled to herself, recognizing his concern for what it was. "You're right. For now, we should prioritize finding this beacon before they do, while saving any lives we can along the way."

John nodded and continued up the path the geth had traveled down from. Along the way, he had encountered some sort of geth recon drones, which appeared to be similar to sentinels. They were more mobile and could fire much faster, having quickly dropped his shield to 95% while he was moving towards cover. He activated his hologram, which Cortana was quick to take control of, and had it moving out of cover and weaving between shots. It wasn't long before the drones started noticing that the shots were passing through their target and started searching for the real one. But by then, John had already put a bullet through each of them with his HBR.

After he came over the next ridge, John saw the same gunnery sergeant from the distress call below him, running from two geth drones. What had him momentarily stunned, was when he saw her take a direct hit to the back, resulting in a blue glow forming around her rather than any injuries. "She has personal shields."

"Hmmâ€|perhaps ONI has been working on the shield technology for mass production. However, that armor appears to be less equipped than even the standard ODST BDU. I have no idea where the power source for those shields is stored." Cortana explained. "Chief! Look over there!"

He glanced over at the blue NAV marker she had overlaid onto his HUD, spotting two geth placing a human onto a metal triangular base. He narrowed his eyes and was about to raise his HBR to fire when a metal spike erupted from the base, impaling the human onto it. "Cortana what was that?"

"Unknown. I'm detecting massive energy readings from that thing, but no life signs from the civilian. Whatever it is, it's pumping energy directly into his body." Cortana replied.

He saw the two geth moving out to search for the sergeant, who had taken the opportunity to hide behind a rock further down south. John shot the head off of the target closest to him, but automatic rifle fire destroyed the second. He glanced in the direction it came from, and spotted two human soldiers, a female commander and a male lieutenant further out. Considering there were no more hostiles in the area, he decided to make contact with the local forces.

He descended from his position towards the sergeant, his rifle cradled in his arms casually. "Are you injured Gunny?"

The sergeant turned around and her eyes widened in shock, but recognizing a superior officer, saluted in response. "No sir. Kinetic barriers took the brunt of it."

He tilted his head to the side as he inspected her armor. It appeared to be true. There were only minor burns on her armor. Were it not for those, it would have appeared new. "What's your name, Gunny?"

"Sir! Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams of the 212 reporting for duty sir. You the one in charge here sir?"

At this point the two higher ranked soldiers arrived, prompting a salute from both Ashley and John. The stares of shock coming from their faces confused John. Almost all enlisted UNSC personnel knew about him by now, and even distant colonists had heard about the SPARTANS. So why were these two staring at him like he was some sort of new species?

The woman shook her head to break the shock and returned the salute briefly. "I'm Commander Velana Shepard, and this is Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko. Either one of you two injured?"

"Negative ma'am," they answered simultaneously.

"Alright, then I believe introductions are in orderâ€œ especially from you," she commented, staring at John.

"Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams of the 212 ma'am. We were patrolling the perimeter when the attack hit. We tried to get off a distress call, but they cut off our communications. I've been fighting for my life ever since."

"Master Chief Petty Officer, Spartan 117, ma'am. I received a distress call from this colony and came in to investigate."

Ashley sent a grateful look towards him at hearing that their reinforcements had arrived.

Velana blinked in shock and stared at him. What the hell was a Spartan? And how many were there, if this one was number 117? "Your ship was the blip in our radar when we received the distress call, wasn't it?"

John nodded, as that probably was when Cortana activated their own ship's stealth systems. "And your ship was the one we detected entering the system moments after ours."

Kaidan stepped forward and raised a hand to forestall any further conversation. "Hold on, you detected the Normandy? How? The IES stealth systems were active."

"Am I to assume that was what rendered you invisible to our thermal scanners, sir?" John asked.

Kaidan nodded in confirmation. "It is. The IES, or Internal Emission Sink, ensures our heat emissions can't be picked up by other ships, so how did you do it?"

"We picked up your ship's energy levels instead, sir. The only way to avoid detection by those scanners, would be to have your ship go dark. No power running. It's vastly more efficient sir." John explained calmly.

Kaidan and Velana glanced at each other, alarmed. "Joker's going to have a heart attack Commander."

She nodded in agreement. "He's certainly not going to like 'his baby' being ineffective against another ship. But let's move on. Williams, where's the rest of your squad?"

Ashley took a steadyng breath before responding, to calm herself down. "We tried to double back to the beacon, but we walked into an ambush. I don't think any of the othersâ€| I think I'm the only one left."

Velana realized she had to nip this in the bud before it got too far. "This isn't your fault, Williams. You couldn't have done anything to save them."

Ashley nodded at logic in her words. "Yes ma'am. We held our position as long as we could. Until the geth overwhelmed us."

Kaidan looked over to Velana and frowned in thought. "The geth haven't been seen outside the Veil in over 200 years. Why are they here now?"

John narrowed his eyes slightly as he took in the lieutenant's words. What did he mean by that? Humanity had never encountered these geth before, not in 200 years or ever. Things were making less and less sense as time passed by. He put it at the back of his mind for now, but he'd get Cortana to do a little history digging later.

"Sir, I managed to scavenge some data from the memory banks of a downed geth. They came here searching for the beacon," John commented respectfully.

Ashley pointed her arm off to the right and said, "The dig site is close, just over that rise. It might still be there."

John glanced over in the direction Ashley was pointing and saw a small circular area with unused excavation lights. Velana turned to face the two of them, after glancing in the direction Ashley indicated herself. "Master Chief, Williams, we could use your help to secure the beacon."

Ashley nodded determinedly and hefted her assault rifle. "Aye, aye ma'am. It's time for payback."

John stayed silent, but ejected the clip from his HBR and slapped in a fresh one, prompting raised eyebrows from the other three.
"What?"

After a few seconds, it was Kaidan who put their thoughts into words. "Youâ€| ahâ€| you use manually loaded ammunition clips?"

John raised an eyebrow in confusion. The Lieutenant was speaking as if that was an unnatural or unusual sight. "I don't understand sir. What seems to be the problem?"

Velana slapped her hand over Kaidan's mouth before he could respond, though she too was now scrutinizing him intently. "We can save it for later, Alenko. Right now our mission is to retrieve that beacon. Master Chief, you take point."

John nodded and started moving ahead, frequently checking his motion detector for signs of more geth, but it read all clear. He stopped suddenly, when he encountered three more of the spires he and Cortana had seen. Only these had decomposed humans impaled on them.

"Chief, this shouldn't have happened this fast. It's not possible. I

thinkâ€|somehow, these spires must be rapidly advancing the decomposition process. But what purpose does it serve?" Cortana trailed off worriedly.

John had no reply for Cortana, but was a little unnerved at the sight. He thought he saw a spark of electricity run through one of the arms, but it disappeared when he blinked. He shook his head and moved on, well aware that the other three were waiting for him to proceed. Just as he spotted the entrance to the dig site, his motion detector read four hostiles ahead of them. "Commander, we have hostiles inbound. Reading four contacts."

"Roger that Chief. Move to the right and take out the two over there. We'll take the other two on the left." Velana ordered.

John dashed across the path and crouched down behind a rocky wall. The two geth on this side were approaching his position slowly. He glanced to his left and saw the commander hold up her fingers for a countdown. Three secondsâ€|twoâ€|one. He leapt over his cover, firing several rounds straight into the chest of the geth not two feet in front of him. The rounds blasted straight through it, and impacted into the one behind it; though apparently the geth's shields stopped any effect from the secondhand shots.

It raised its rifle to fire at his head, but John wasn't about to give it the chance. He ejected the hard light dagger in his right gauntlet and ran forward, burying it into the geth's curved neck, just below the head. He jerked his hand down, slicing the entire thing off, before retracting his blade. A quick glance over at the left, showed the other two had been dispatched by the combined firepower from the three soldiers.

The group headed into the center of the excavation site and found it empty. Ashley looked around the area several times, before she sighed. "This is the dig site. The beacon was right here. It must have been moved."

"By who, our side? Or the geth?" Kaidan asked.

Ashley shrugged in response to his query. "Hard to say, sir. Maybe we'll know more after we check out the research camp."

Velana crouched down, dipping two of her covered fingers in a small puddle of green ooze. She rubbed them against her thumb slowly and frowned. "What I'm more worried about, is what happened to the research team. You think anyone got out of here alive?"

John nodded slowly. "It is highly possible ma'am. In the confusion of the attack, a few people may have escaped and sought shelter to wait it out. Overall, the attack seems disorganized and chaotic. I don't believe the geth went out of their way to eliminate everyone, as it would have slowed their progress in reaching the beacon."

Velana nodded. An uncoordinated assault always created opportunities for survival. "Williams, where would survivors go if they wanted to hide?"

Ashley glanced up the hill to their right. "In the camps most likely. It's just on the top of this ridge. Up the ramps."

Velana nodded and motioned the Chief forward. He nodded and pulled out his CAWS as he headed up the hill. He saw black smoke rising from ahead, which was never a good sign. As he came upon the camp, all he saw was a few trailers and some wreckage. If his suspicion from earlier was correct, the survivors could have hidden in one of the undamaged ones.

John spotted three more spires with impaled people upon them; however this time he couldn't be imagining it. Those bodies didn't look human anymore. What was once skin, now seemed to be a thin metal alloy. From the hole in each chest where the spire pierced through, a myriad of blue energy lines ran throughout the entire body. They even ran through the mouth and head, filling the now empty eye sockets with light.

"It's a good place for an ambush, keep your guard up." Kaidan's words snapped John out of his thoughts and had him moving further into the camp. However, it was only a moment later that the center spire descended, and with a static discharge, the body popped off of it.

The body swayed unsteadily on its feet for a few seconds, until it started running straight at him. He narrowed his eyes and leveled his shotgun, firing straight through the thing's chest. The second he did, its body exploded out in a massive burst of energy, which drained his shields by a quarter. Had he been standing any closer, that blast might have drained a full layer of his shields. Alarmed he quickly turned to the others, as the remaining two spires descended. "Don't let them get close to you."

"Got it Chief!" Kaidan started backpedaling rapidly, as he fired shot after shot into the chest of the oncoming enemy with his pistol. It kept drawing closer, until Velana blasted it off its feet with her own shotgun. She then switched back to her assault rifle and combined fire with Ashley to eliminate the last before it had taken more than a few steps away from the spire.

John scanned around the area, searching for any more of those things, but found none. He walked over to one of the fallen bodies and fired another shell into its head, before crouching down to inspect it. There were no organs inside of it and instead of blood, a green ooze like substance leaked out; similar to the puddle found by the commander at the dig site. He had a hunch that they'd just found the research team. "Cortana what is this thing?"

"I think it's _was_ a human. Preliminary analysis indicates that its entire body is cybernetic. No organic material detected. My god I think those spires are designed to convert organic life forms into these husks. There's nothing left of the original person used to make this thing."

John frowned darkly. It was like the Flood all over again. Although, this process seemed like it would be much more painful. To have all your organs, skin, and water content slowly converted into cybernetic componentsâ€œit was like torture, desecration of the dead, and recruitment for the geth all wrapped up in one.

"Chief, we have survivors over here!" Velana called out.

He stood up, sparing one last look at the fallen monstrosity, now

deemed a husk by Cortana, and headed over to the trailer Commander Shepard had unlocked, spotting the two civilians she had indicated. Judging from their appearance, they were two of the scientists working on whatever this beacon was.

The man shuffled over, wringing his hands together nervously. The look in his eyes appeared distorted or deranged. "Hurry! Close the door! Before they come back!"

Velana glanced over at the man momentarily before deciding the woman would provide the better answers. "Don't worry. We'll protect you."

The female civilian nodded and took a calming breath. "Thank you, but I think we'll be okay now. It looks like everyone's gone."

Ashley snapped her fingers in recognition. "You're Dr. Warren, the one in charge of the excavation. Do you know what happened to the beacon?"

"It was moved to the spaceport this morning. Manuel and I stayed behind to help pack the camp. When the attack came, the marines held them off long enough for us to hide. They gave their lives to save us." She said.

The scientist, now known as Manuel, began shaking his head frantically. "No one is saved. The age of humanity is ended. Soon, only ruin and corpses will remain."

John narrowed his eyes, as he took in the words from this man, while Shepard continued questioning Dr. Warren. Despite how many were killed defending this colony, one attack certainly wasn't the end of humanity. Then he froze. This was getting suspiciously similar to Harvest. He shook that thought away quickly. These geth were inferior compared to Covenant troops by a large margin.

Velana cut into Dr. Warren's description of the attack mid-sentence. "Did you notice a turian in the area?"

"I saw him. The prophet. Leader of the enemy. He was here, before the attack." Manuel said.

A prophet being the leader of the enemy forces? That brought up painful memories for John. Still, he had never heard of them being called turians. In fact, he'd never heard the term at all. Perhaps it was local slang?

Kaidan shook his head. "That's impossible. Nihilus was with us on the Normandy before the attack. He couldn't have been here."

John walked over to Kaidan while Commander Shepard asked about the beacon. "Sir, I was wondering if you could tell me what a turian is."

Kaidan glanced at the Master Chief, and hummed in thought. "You really don't know?"

John shook his head negative. "I'm afraid not sir."

Kaidan tapped his chin in thought, before snapping his fingers. "I

can upload the codex file to your omni-tool from mine, Chief. Just have yours ready to receive the file."

"Sir, what is an omni-tool?" John inquired.

Kaidan paused, raising his head slowly, staring at him quite oddly. "It's the multipurpose diagnostic and manufacturing tool used for a variety of battlefield tasks, such as hacking, decryption, or repair. It's standard issue for soldiers and engineers now. Considering you managed to salvage data from a geth's memory banks, I assumed you already had one."

John remained silent, thinking about it. He didn't want to reveal Cortana to him yet. Something wasn't right. These soldiers didn't recognize him, were shocked by the use of ammo clips, and apparently had knowledge of an, unknown to him, enemy that last appeared 200 years ago. "No sir. I just have an edge when dealing with technology. Where can I obtain one of these omni-tools?"

Kaidan nodded in understanding. It was probable that the Master Chief had received training in engineering in addition to his combat training. "We can get you one on the Citadel, and I can transfer the data on turians to you then. We'll be heading back there after we grab the beacon."

John wanted to ask what the Citadel was, but remained silent. From the way the lieutenant had spoken about it, it might be common knowledge to these people. For now it was probably best to follow along. "Cortana you've been silent for a while. Any reason why?"

"Chiefâ€|something is seriously wrong here. All these names, facts, and technology, none of it is in the UNSC databanks. It sounds like a 'turian' is a different species, but we've never encountered them before. I also don't know what citadel he is referring to. I'm not sure what a codex file is, but it's probably a source of information. We should make it a priority to get one of these 'omni-tools' and start collecting codex files."

Now John was worried. Whatever was wrong, it had Cortana slightly frazzled as well. As soon as he could, he'd have to find one of those omni-tools and research the obscure facts and names he was hearing.

"Williams, take us to the spaceport," Velana ordered.

Ashley nodded, and the four of them left the trailer, rounding the corner and heading down the hill. A loud bang, a gunshot most likely, rang through the area. The other three apparently hadn't noticed, which meant John only heard it due to his enhanced hearing.

"What is that, off in the distance?" Kaidan's question had John and the others glancing up to see a large ship leaving the space port.

"It's a ship. Look at the size of it!" Ashley exclaimed.

Cortana scoffed. "It's 2 km long Chief, and it looks like a cephalopod. It's not very intimidating. The only thing special about, as far as I can tell, is that signal it's putting out."

"What signal?" John asked.

"Well, if it wasn't for the fact that I'm in your head, you'd be hearing an ultra low-frequency transmitting signal. I'll need time to thoroughly examine the pattern aboard the *Moonlight Shadow*, but primary analysis indicates it's designed specifically to reach a frequency only humans can hear. Like how a dog whistle works I'd imagine. I can't be sure of the purpose yet either until I get time to examine it."

John stared up at it carefully, watching as it ascended through the atmosphere. He was tempted to have Cortana shoot it down, but decided against it. His ship was still cloaked, and he felt it would be better to keep it that way until it was absolutely necessary for him to reveal it.

He saw faint movement on the loading bay down the hill, and pulled out his ARTEMIS. He crouched down and zoomed in through the scope, spotting two geth soldiers guarding the stairs up. Rather than wasting time expending a shot for each, he targeted a fuel canister on the ground beside them. He pulled the trigger, shooting the canister and igniting it, catching both in the explosion. As the fires cleared, it was revealed that neither one had survived the blast.

However, the spire beside the loading bay descended, letting a husk loose that began charging up the hill. He quickly lined it up in his sights, and shot a round clear through its skull. Three more spires around the area descended, bringing three more husks charging up the hill towards them. The lieutenant became covered in a blue glow as he raised his arm up. All three of the charging husks began floating into the air, allowing them to be picked off by Velana and Ashley's assault rifle bursts.

John glanced at Kaidan who nodded in understanding, bringing his glowing omni-tool up as explanation. John nodded and realized he'd need to obtain one as soon as possible to get some information. After all, he'd never seen a human with the ability to lift hostiles into the air. The file on whatever that was, would be an interesting read for sure.

The group moved towards another untouched trailer, as Shepard began hacking into the electronic lock.

"Everyone stay calm out there. We're coming out. We're not armed," a voice from inside called out.

The door opened and three civilians stepped out into the open. Judging from their simple appearance and the dirt covering them, they might have been farmers. They all stared up at John until Commander Shepard's cough brought them back to reality.

The farmer in the center, Cole he'd said his name was, addressed the four of them. "Those things were crawling all around the shed. They would have found us for sure. We owe you our lives."

The woman to Cole's left, shakily wiped the sweat from her brow. "I-I still can't believe it. When we saw that ship, I thought it was all over."

Cole nodded in agreement with her statement. "It showed up right before the attack. Knew it was trouble the second I saw it. So we made a break for the sheds."

Velana frowned, deep in thought. Something about that ship was bugging her. She glanced up at Cole seriously. "What else can you tell me about that ship?"

The woman to Cole's left poked him in the arm. "Tell them about the noise Cole."

He nodded and said, "It was emitting some kind of signal as it descended. Sounded like a shriek of the damned. Only it was coming from inside your own head."

"It was probably trying to block communications," Velana reasoned.

Cole shrugged helplessly. "Whatever it was, felt like it was tearing through my skull. Almost made it impossible to think. "

Cortana hummed in thought. Her hypothesis seemed more and more likely. "It sounds like this signal works exactly like a dog whistle Chief. Causes pain to distract the soldiers for the geth to eliminate. It's clever, and I'm not sure if sound dampeners would completely work."

Even he had to admit, it sounded very effective. Were it not for Cortana and those nanites, it would probably affect him as well. Spartans with their augmented hearing would be especially vulnerable to such an attack.

"Chief, Williams, let's move out," Velana called out.

John nodded and took point once more, bringing out his HBR to use for now. They moved cautiously down the hill, constantly checking around for more hostiles, but found it empty. As he moved up the stairs to the main loading dock, he saw the dead body of an alien on the ground, a pool of blood beneath its head.

"Commander, it's Nihlus," Kaidan stated solemnly.

John swept the area with his rifle, before moving over to the body and inspecting it. The alien resembled a Sangheili in some ways, and a human in others. Its features were distinctly avian-like in appearance, and it was over six feet tall. It had two long, proportionately thick fingers and an opposable thumb on each hand, each tipped with talons, and a set of mandibles around its mouth. At the top of its head were several pointed spikes connected to its face, which was covered in war paint.

John saw something attached to its left arm similar to what Lieutenant Alenko possessed. He slowly pulled it off and saw the tag 'Savant X' printed on the side. Passing it off as just the manufacturer, he slid the device onto his left arm and saw it completely fade from view. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't long before Cortana chimed in with the results.

"Unbelievable. Chief, do you know how much this baby can do? If you

thought I was impressive before, wait until you see me using this thing! And it has a full codex library, such a wealth of information! Even for me, it'll take me a bit of time to go through all of it. Try not to need me for a few hours."

He groaned softly. It was like the Halo control room all over again. At least this time, he hadn't been able to get in a word edgewise that might label him a barbarian.

Ashley raised her pistol and called out, "Something's moving! Over behind those crates!"

Her exclamation brought John to full attention, leveling his rifle just over the crates. He waited for whatever was back there to reveal itself, only to see a human dock worker emerge, waving his hands.

"Wait! Don'tâ€"don't shoot! I'm one of you! I'm human."

Velana narrowed her eyes, but didn't lower her pistol. "What were you doing sneaking around back there?"

He rubbed the back of his neck nervously, well aware of the four different guns aimed at him. "Iâ€| I'm sorry. I was hiding. From those creatures. My name's Powell. I saw what happened to that turian. The other one shot him."

After a second's pause, Velana holstered her pistol and motioned for the others to do the same. Kaidan and Ashley immediately did so, but John merely lowered his rifle, keeping it ready in his arms just in case. "I need to know how Nihlus died."

Powell nodded eagerly, feeling more certain he wasn't going to die now. "The other one got here first. He was waiting when your friend showed up. He called him Saren. I think they knew each other. Your friend seemed to relax. He let his guard downâ€| and Saren killed him. Shot him right in the back of his head. I'm just lucky he didn't see me behind the crates."

Velana nodded slowly. A traitorâ€|and someone Nihlus knew enough to drop his guard. Another Spectre perhaps? It wasn't important right now. "We were told a Prothean beacon was brought to the spaceport. What happened to it?"

"It's over on the other platform. Probably where that guy Saren was headed. He hopped on the cargo train right after he killed your friend," Powell said. "I knew that beacon was trouble. Everything's gone to hell since we first found it. First that damn mother ship showed up. Then the attack. They killed everyone. Everyone! If I hadn't been behind the crates I'd be dead, too!"

Velana narrowed her eyes suspiciously. She ran through his words one more time in her head, before she thought she figured it out. "How come you're the only one who survived? Why didn't anyone else try to hide behind the crates?"

It appeared she had caught him. John saw the embarrassed and sheepish look pass over his face. "They never had a chance. Iâ€| I was already behind the crates when the attack started," Powell answered hesitantly.

Kaidan held up his right hand, forestalling a comment from Shepard.
"Wait a minute. You were hiding before the attack?"

Powell wrung his hands together as he replied, "I sometimes I need a nap to get through my shift. I sneak off behind the crates to grab forty winks where the supervisor can't find me."

"You survived because you're lazy?" Ashley asked angrily.

Velana glanced at Powell with almost as much loathing as Ashley. "If you hadn't snuck off for that nap, you'd probably be dead like all the others."

He couldn't help but hang his head. "Yeah. Yeah, I don't like to think about it."

Velana figured that was all she'd get out of him. "We need to find that beacon before it's too late."

"Take the cargo train. That's where the other turian went," Powell said.

Velana glanced at the other three and nodded, as she pulled out her assault rifle. Kaidan readied his pistol, while Ashley pulled out her sniper rifle for long range support. John nodded that he was ready as he raised his HBR and took point once more.

As he rounded the next corner, his motion detector showed multiple red dots further ahead. He fired 3-round bursts into the heads of the three geth in front of him, but had to duck down as the rest fired at him from the cargo train. He heard a loud boom behind him, and saw that Ashley had eliminated one while they focused on him.

They headed down the ramp and onto the train, where John saw a geth standing at twelve feet high with a white, heavily armored body. He fired a burst into its head, but saw no visible damage inflicted. So these larger versions had stronger shields apparently. He ducked behind cover, pulling out a plasma grenade which he quickly primed and tossed onto the geth. The grenade detonated in a blue flash, blasting a hole through the chest, and dropping the hulking geth instantly.

A geth trooper popped out of cover and fired upon him, slowly draining his shield until Kaidan, once more glowing blue, threw his arm out at it. The geth was blasted off its feet and sent crashing into another one further down the train. Only seconds later Ashley fired a round through the both of them with her sniper rifle.

The area in front of them was clear, but at the very end of the train, four more geth were left. He set his HBR on his back and pulled out his ARTEMIS. Shepard, apparently knowing his goal, started dashing back and forth between cover, drawing their fire. This gave him ample time to line up his shot with the larger version standing out in the open, and blast its head off. As he lined up the next target, he heard a bang and saw it go down, while the other two were destroyed by Shepard's rifle fire and fell quickly.

They dashed to the controls, which Velana quickly started. Ashley strutted over to the Master Chief and gave him a cocky grin. "Gotta

be faster if you want those kills, Chief."

John remained silent as he ejected the nearly empty drum on his ARTEMIS and slapped in a fresh one. He didn't have to say anything, for the message was clear. Challenge accepted.

* * *

><p>As the cargo train pulled up to the platform, John heard a distinct beeping noise. He glanced to his right, and saw what was clearly a bomb. Velana immediately dashed over and started the process of disarming it.</p>

"Demolition charges! The geth must have planted them." Kaidan said.

"Hurry â€“ we need to find them all and shut them down!" Ashley exclaimed.

John raised his ARTEMIS and blew the head off a geth aiming at the commander. As he was about to fire on the next one, it fired a rocket straight at them. "Incoming!"

Luckily Shepard had just finished disarming the bomb and ducked behind the ramp's sidewall. The shock wave from the explosive impact knocked Kaidan and Ashley off their feet, but didn't seem to have caused any injuries, thanks to their shields. He quickly pulled them back up and into cover, as they started making their way to the upper level.

John instantly started taking hits to his shield from the other end of the platform. He dashed halfway onto the nearby bridge and took cover behind one of the sidewalls, while Ashley and Kaidan took cover behind two nearby support pillars. He poked his ARTEMIS around the left side of the wall and tried to line up the head of the geth sniper, but it was hidden behind a glowing blue hexagonal shield. Even if he already suspected what the end result would be, he took the shot anyways. Unsurprisingly, the shield rippled slightly, but held firm.

"Chief, there's a demolition charge at the other end of the bridge! I need you to provide me cover fire until I can reach it!" Velana ordered.

"Understood, Commander." John clicked off the mic with his chin so he could talk to Cortana privately. "I need a weapon swap. Replace the ARTEMIS and send down the Suppressor."

"You got it Chief." The sniper rifle held in his hands was surrounded by two glowing rings of blue light that started in the middle and separated in opposite directions to move over the entire weapon. As soon as the rings reached the end, the gun vanished in a burst of blue light. When it dispersed, John saw he was now holding the, currently disassembled, Z-130 Suppressor in his hands.

The gun rapidly assembled itself in his hands, the five separate pieces clicking into place, and the glowing orange light indicating it was ready to fire. He set the gun atop the metal wall he was currently crouched behind and took aim at the glowing blue shield the sniper was still taking refuge behind. The second he pulled the

trigger, the rifle lived up to its name as it unleashed a continuous stream of lethal hard light projectiles across the platform.

The shield didn't even hold up for a full second. The hard light projectiles pierced straight through it and tore apart the geth sniper hiding behind it. He spared a moment to glance to his left, noticing that Commander Shepard had managed to make it to the demolition charge and was currently diffusing it, but had to instantly duck as a rocket shot through the space his head would have occupied. "Williams, take out that rocket trooper."

Ashley peeked around the pillar, spotting the crimson red armor of the rocket trooper, still firing on the chief's position. She fired a shot straight into its head, but did not manage to pierce through its kinetic barriers. "Tough son of a bitch, huh?" She waited for her rifle to cool down and fired another shot into its chest cavity, tearing through the shields and ripping the body apart. "Hostile down!"

John moved to the other side of the bridge and spotted another geth soldier at the other end, firing suppressive fire on his location. He held his left hand out to forestall Shepard's advancement, but let it drop as Kaidan sent the geth flying off the other end to crash down on the lower level. He checked his motion sensor and saw no more hostiles in the immediate area. "We're clear commander."

Velana nodded as she started diffusing the third charge while Kaidan finished up the last one on the opposite end where the geth had been positioned. Ashley walked over to John and started examining the glowing rifle he held in his hands with fascination. "Woah! This is some seriously high tech, chief. Who made it?"

John hesitated momentarily, unsure of how to answer that. With all the unfamiliar knowledge he had gained in the last two hours, he wasn't sure if revealing this was a Forerunner-made rifle was a good idea. Commander Shepard was already waiting at the junction to the next area with Kaidan, so he didn't have time to think of a good excuse right now. This would be so much easier if Cortana wasn't busy. "I'll tell you after we finish the mission."

Ashley nodded. "Fair enough."

John sighed under his breath and followed after the three soldiers, setting the Suppressor onto his back and pulling out the CAWS. That was a crisis averted for now, but it was unlikely Ashley would forget that easily. As he moved down the walkway and down the ramp, he heard the familiar metal scraping sound of husk spires descending. Sure enough, a pair of the annoying things were sprinting towards him, even as a pair of geth troopers were firing at him from behind several crates.

He fired a shot from his CAWS into the first, causing it to release a large burst of energy as the blast ripped right through its midsection. Velana pivoted around from behind him and released her own powerful shotgun blast into the second husk, actually knocking it off its feet and sending it rolling along the floor.

John rolled down the ramp and took cover behind a large shipping crate, pulling out and priming a plasma grenade, and tossed it over the crate towards the two geth troopers. The burst of blue plasma

instantly destroyed one, but the other was far enough away to avoid the main blast. The EMP effect however, was still able to shut down the rifle it held, rendering it defenseless as Ashley took it out with a shot to the head.

John moved out of cover and did a sweep of the area, but the area was dead silent. Directly in front of him was a large spire glowing with green wisps of energy. He assumed this was the beacon they had come for, and walked forward to examine it, hoping to see what was so special about it.

Velana nodded in satisfaction upon seeing the beacon, and raised her hand to her COM link. "Normandy, the beacon is secure. Request immediate evac. We're bringing a guest along."

Kaidan and Ashley holstered their respective weapons and joined master chief in front of the beacon, observing it with much more awe and amazement than him. "This is amazing. Actual working Prothean technology. Unbelievable!" Kaidan exclaimed.

Ashley furrowed her brow as she noticed the green energy it was giving off, and managed to hear a faint humming sound from it when she concentrated. "It wasn't doing anything like that when they dug it up."

"Something must have activated it." Kaidan said as he and Ashley started moving closer to it.

"Roger, Normandy. Standing by." Velana shut down the link between her and the ship just as the beacon emitted a strong pulse. Kaidan, Ashley, and surprisingly even John were getting pulled in towards the beacon, their feet dragging against the ground uselessly. Velana dashed forward and wrapped her arms around Kaidan's waist, tossing him out of the beacon's range beside her, just as John did the same for Ashley. The two of them struggled for a few more moments until they were lifted into the air side by side.

"Shepard!"

"Chief!"

John winced in pain as he saw images being forced into his mind, likely by the beacon in front of him. He saw some unknown race being slaughtered by an unknown enemy. It appeared to be done in a way that prolonged their suffering.

Torture. Something he highly disapproved of.

The images were flashing by, some blurring together so closely that it was hard to clearly discern anything in them. There were several blanks in the images, moments where he went from seeing an image to seeing only darkness, and back again. Perhaps this beacon was damaged in some way.

After what felt like an eternity, but in reality was only a few minutes, the beacon exploded, sending John and Velana crashing to the ground. John raised his head weakly and saw that the commander had apparently passed out from the experience. He faintly heard Cortana calling out his name, and saw Ashley running over to check on him,

but the pain in his head reached an unbearable level, and he too succumbed to unconsciousness.

* * *

><p>As always, read and review please! I'm sure I've probably missed at least one spelling or grammar error, so if you find any, please point them out to me.</p>

3. Chapter 3

Disclaimer: I don't own anything concerning Halo or Mass Effect in anyway.

So here's chapter 3, and we'll finally get to the Citadel now.

This is a Master Chief x Tali pairing and it will NOT be removed or changed. Please feel free to stop reading if this bothers you.

* * *

><p>John blinked his eyes open slowly, and sat up, aware of the minor throbbing in his head. He looked around at his surroundings and found himself in an unfamiliar ship. There was a large vehicle to his right and equipment lockers to his left. The pelican that had first dropped him off was offline just behind him, and standing before him was a man in a navy blue uniform. The insignia identified this man as a captain, so he stood up slowly and saluted promptly.</p>

"At ease soldier. My name is Captain Anderson, and according to Alliance personnel files, you don't exist. So, while I am grateful you helped recover the beacon and saved the life of an Alliance soldier, I'd like an explanation as to who you are. Lieutenant Alenko and Gunnery Chief Williams gave me some details, but not nearly enough."

"I think I can explain that, sir." The omni-tool on John's left arm began glowing, and projected a life-size image of Cortana before them. Thankfully she had decided to wear clothes, and now sported an ensemble similar to something he'd seen Dr. Halsey wear.

Anderson's eyes widened in surprise, and he stared at the projection of Cortana. "An AI. You created an AI? Don't you know how dangerous that is?" he asked.

"Sir, if you'll give me time to explain, all your questions will be answered. But suffice to say, when I was created, AIs were not illegal."

He raised an eyebrow in doubt, but motioned for the chief to follow him into the elevator. Cortana's image vanished and John followed the captain into the elevator. As they slowly ascended, Cortana sighed in frustration. "All this technology and no one could build a faster elevator?" she asked through John's external helmet speakers.

Anderson was surprised to find himself chuckling, and led them up the stairs and into the com room. John immediately noticed a few of the seats in there were already filled. The Lieutenant and Gunnery Chief

were there, as was Commander Shepard.

Anderson took a seat between Kaidan and Velana and nodded towards him. "You may proceedâ€| Master Chief was it?"

He raised his left arm, causing the omni-tool to glow once more, and brought out Cortana's projection. Without any prompting, she took the lead for the discussion. "Hello, my name is Cortana. I am a UNSC 'smart' AI, and the personal partner of the Master Chief here."

Predictably, cries of outrage sprung up from Kaidan and Ashley, though Velana remained silent, staring at Cortana in a mix of curiosity and interest.

"How could you disobey Council laws and create an AI? This could get you arrested or executed if they find out!" Kaidan exclaimed.

"No offense chief, but what the hell were you thinking? This thing could try to kill you or use you to make contact with the geth and join them!" Ashley stated.

Cortana coughed into her fist and glared at Ashley. "First of all, I would never betray the Chief. He and I have literally been through hell on Earth together, so don't start grouping me with those flashlight heads."

Cortana took a calming breath and turned to face Captain Anderson. "And sir, none of the history I've read about so far in Nihilus' codex files matches the recorded history I have from the UNSC. Humanity is severely underdeveloped, and relying on alien technology, rather than the technology they created themselves. There are races mentioned that we've never encountered before; and this citadel they use as their center of government in Council space? We've never heard of it before. Finally, the date is off by 370 years, leaving me no other option but to conclude we are not in our own universe."

The room was silent as they tried to absorb what Cortana had just said. Even John was having doubts about her statement; however he did admit there were many things that didn't add up. Finally, Captain Anderson cleared his throat, bringing all eyes onto him.

"Chief, you helped us out a lot on Eden Prime. I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, and ask what proof you have to back this claim up." he said.

"First off, I believe I should show you the differences in AI research in this reality compared to our own. Hopefully that will let you understand why I will not betray the Chief and how I am different." Cortana said, as she snapped her fingers, sending the compared research she had done to their omni-tools. She made sure to only send the overview of the 'smart' AI creation, with details of the results and capabilities, but not the actual process.

Instantly the four of them had their omni-tools active and began looking over the files Cortana had sent, with Lieutenant Alenko being the only person who seemed to comprehend the material. He raised his head and stared at her in awe. "You...you're based off of a real person! With human morals and logic! Well, military wise at least. Even still, that'sâ€|that's incredible. That kind of foundation would

greatly stabilize an AI's thinking and give it a sense of individuality!"

Cortana smiled proudly and nodded, basking in his praise of her very existence. "Yes, I do have morals, and emotions, which actually lets me work more efficiently with the Master Chief here. I was made specifically to help him on a mission, but even when that mission was scrubbed, we were still friends and partners fighting against the Covenant. I'm actually his personal combat AI, and due to several recent upgrades I'm not at liberty to discuss, I've achieved full sentience."

Ashley whistled, very much impressed. "Damn Chief! She helped you slap away a surface to air missile? I gotta admit, the lady's got skills."

"What is thisâ€|UNSC I keep hearing about?" Anderson asked, cutting off the AI talk.

"The UNSC, which stands for the United Nations Space Command, was formed in December of 2163, and serves as the military, exploratory, and scientific agency of the Unified Earth Government." She then went on to summarize what the UEG was, the bloody history of the Interplanetary War against communist and fascist forces, and the fight against the Insurrectionists who wanted independence from the Unified Earth Government. Because of this, she had to briefly mention the SPARTAN-II program, drawing all eyes to John.

"So you're some kind of super soldier made to fight terrorists? How did you get chosen for the program?" Velana asked him.

Cortana motioned for him to explain, as this concerned him specifically. "Before he says anything, I'd like it noted that the UNSC only did what they felt was necessary. I'll explain why after this." Cortana cut in before he could speak.

John nodded and cleared his throat with a cough, mentally planning out what to reveal, and what to keep classified. "The SPARTAN-II program was headed by Dr. Catherine Halsey, who is also the human base for Cortana here. She had specific requirements for the gene-candidate pool and precise age requirements. The candidates would have also had to possess superior physical and mental attributes for their age. The trainees had to be instilled with military value, and the understanding of war; something that could not be taught to enlisted soldiers. This narrowed the candidates down to children, who would be raised and taught in the art of warfare and military values, from a young age. Understandably, using such controversial means of creating a soldier meant that the project had to be carried out in the highest form of secrecy."

"Youâ€|were inducted as a child? That's horrible! They basically forced military belief onto you when you were at your most impressionable age! Didn't your parents object?" Velana asked, horrified by what she was hearing.

John stared at her silently, unsure of how to correctly phrase his answer. "The parents never knew we were inducted. We were replaced by flash-cloned versions of ourselves, which were guaranteed to die within several months, due to the excessive age acceleration. For all they knew, their son or daughter had passed away from various

neurological and physiological diseases."

This time, it wasn't just Velana staring at him in horror. All of them, even Captain Anderson, were looking disgusted and outraged by what they'd just heard. "That's despicable! Taking children away from the only lives they've ever had to create soldiers is wrong in every sense of the word." Anderson said angrily.

Kaidan, remembering that Cortana had said it was necessary, pushed down the reminders of Jump Zero and pressed on. "What kind of training did they give to you as children Chief?"

"We were placed into situations and drills that pushed our abilities to the limit and beyond. Combat drills, daily calisthenics, obstacle courses, we had it all. It was complemented with high-level education, which included mathematics, science, reading, writing, and military tactics. Our instructor was Chief Petty Officer Mendez, and although his training methodology was tough, even brutal in some regards, he always instilled discipline, honor, and respect into us. He taught us how to kill, but at the same time he taught them the difference between right and wrong. He personally taught me the difference between spending and wasting lives, after the bio-augmentations procedure the SPARTANS underwent."

"Bio-augmentation procedures? What did they include, Chief?" Ashley asked, her disgust quickly fading, and her curiosity peaking. Despite what these SPARTANS went through, or perhaps because of it, they were sounding more and more like the ideal human soldier.

John turned to Cortana and nodded, which she returned and brought up an x-ray of John pre-op. As he detailed the various surgical procedures he underwent, Cortana displayed their results on the x-ray. From the Carbide Ceramic Ossification which made their bones nigh unbreakable, to the Superconducting Fibrification of Neural Dendrites, which increased reflexes by 1400% and showed a marked increase in the SPARTAN's intelligence, memory, and creativity under stress. He left out the thyroid implant and its side effects, as those were no longer pertinent.

"How many SPARTANS were there? And how many survived this procedure?" Anderson asked perceptively.

"There were a total of seventy-five SPARTANS prior to the procedure, sir. Thirty of them died from the side-effects of the surgeries alone. Twelve others were crippled so drastically, they were deemed unfit for combat, and were remanded to the Office of Naval Intelligence, where their intellect could still be used to help; leaving only thirty-three combat ready SPARTANS, sir."

"What were the final results that made such a procedure worth the loss of so many lives, Chief?" Kaidan asked solemnly.

"I'll handle that one. As John is now leaps and bounds beyond the capabilities the SPARTANS were once charted at, I'll be giving you his possible results, rather than theirs. Now while his reaction times are impossible to precisely chart, I estimate it to be within the range of 10-15 milliseconds. It's gotten to the point where, in a high adrenalin situation, he can see things as if they were moving in slow motion. I believe it has come to be known as "SPARTAN Time". He

can reach a top speed of about 105 km/h, or 65.2 mph, if he really sprints it. He is capable of lifting three times his own body weight, which is already double the normal weight of an average human, due to the ceramic bone augmentations, in addition to his increased muscle density. And this is all without adding in the boost his armor gives him."

"Wait, his armor enhances him further than what he can do without it? Holy hell, you really ARE a super soldier!" Ashley exclaimed.

"Speaking of that armor, what can it actually do for you Chief?" Anderson asked.

John remained silent, trying to decide how much to reveal about his armor, until he decided to outline the basic capabilities, including the shielding systems, and several smaller miscellaneous functions. He carefully avoided talking about the power systems and the Forerunner contribution, letting them assume it was all human made.

Velana, who had remained silent this whole time to take in everything before making a judgment, finally decided to speak up. She told him about the Mass Effect designed weapons and asked how they'd work against his shielding systems.

"Your weapons are indeed powerful, but only against kinetic barriers, Commander Shepard." Cortana said. "Because your barriers are only designed to deflect projectiles, they can't last very long under prolonged fire, as the kinetic energy will quickly overwhelm them. And energy weapons will be extremely effective against them. The chief's shields however, were made to absorb the energy from plasma weaponry and projectile impacts, rather than try to deflect it. On the other hand, the weapons the Chief uses, gauss powered rounds, are highly effective against kinetic barriers because of their incredible stopping power."

Anderson raised an eyebrow interestedly. "What kind of stopping power are we talking about here, Cortana?"

"Extremely destructive. I can't provide you with technical details for security reasons, but I can tell you that Gauss rounds have the ability to rip targets apart, even through your kinetic barriers, though I suppose it depends on their strength," Cortana said, remembering the hulking geth unit that withstood a direct shot to the head on Eden Prime. "This is due to the high force imparted on the round, which creates shock waves as it passes through the target. In the case of material targets, this is a minor explosion, while in the case of organic targets, it simultaneously rips apart and pulverizes the body around the impact area. Naturally, this means that even hits on the extremities can be deadly."

Velana and Ashley hummed in thought, imagining what it would be like to have a set of gauss weapons for themselves, while Captain Anderson simply marveled at the effectiveness of the Chief's weapons.

Anderson bent over and rested his chin on his interlaced fingers. "Okay, what we've heard is very persuasive, but not entirely convincing. Anyone could create a good story. I assume the reason the

SPARTANS were needed is the proof you'll show us Cortana?" he asked.

Cortana nodded, as she brought up a projection of a planet in the room. "This is Harvest, a primarily agricultural world in the outer colonies that provided food for many of humanity's colonies."

"It's beautiful." Velana said.

"It looks like another Earth, or Eden Prime." Kaidan chimed in.

Cortana frowned seriously and replaced the image with another. "And this is Harvest after the Covenant glassed it." The world now looked devastated. The two poles on the planet were completely frozen over. The rest of the planet looked horrifically burned and scarred, with no green or blue anywhere to be seen.

"My godâ€¦what happened to it? This isâ€¦ I meanâ€¦the whole planet?" Kaidan stared transfixed on the image of the destroyed planet in horror.

"The Covenant had their ships bombard planets with plasma from their turrets or used special weapons called energy projectors. The term coined for this was glassing." John stated solemnly. He'd fought to stop this from happening so often, and been unsuccessful almost every time.

"You make it sound as if this happened often, Chief. How many worlds were lost toâ€¦glassing?" Anderson asked, his eyes never wavering from the sight of the destroyed Harvest.

"I never received a full count sir, and neither did Cortana. I am sure it was at least 250 out of the total 800 worlds colonized, and likely much more than that."

"Humanity colonized 800 planets? Damn! Now that's how it should be!" Ashley said proudly, momentarily forgetting that at least 250 of those worlds had been glassed.

The next few hours were spent showing them vids, helmet recordings, frozen images, and everything else that wasn't considered classified pertaining to the Human-Covenant war. After a brief glance shared between her and John, she played them Private Jenkins' helmet log of the flood, as well as John's own experiences with them. He saw their faces go white when Captain Keyes was revealed. He himself closed his eyes in remembrance of the person he respected as the greatest naval tactician in UNSC history.

She told them briefly about the Forerunners, the Halos, the Arc, Gravemind, and the end of the war, finishing with their slipspace anomaly that landed them close to Eden Prime.

The four Alliance soldiers were silent as they took in the information until Anderson nodded. "I believe you. Your proof is undeniable, and I have to admit, humanity in your time is how I wish ours could be now. You faced a three decade war almost entirely alone and came out the better for it. You dealt with, and stopped, two possible sources of universal genocide. That's a record far beyond impressive, Chief. Now then, none of these Covenant races you

encountered are in this universe. Humanity is only a part of the universe at large here, and still considered a minor player. We're working to change that, by trying to get a human accepted as a Spectre. Or we were, until Saren stepped in and ruined everything. Alenko, Williams, you two are dismissed. I need to discuss things with the Master Chief and the Commander privately."

"Aye aye, sir." They said together, as they saluted and left the com room.

Cortana turned to face the Chief and said, "I'll be searching through the codex files some more Chief. The more info I have, the better prepared we can be." Her projection faded away silently, as she went back to looking through Nihilus' omni-tool.

John, glad to be done with the debriefing, stood at attention. "Sir, what can you tell me about this turian, Saren?"

Anderson paced back and forth slowly, before turning to face the Chief. "Saren's a Council Spectre, one of the best. A living legend. But if he's working with the geth, it means he's gone rogue. A rogue Spectre's trouble. Saren's dangerous, and he hates humans."

"He|hates humans, sir?" John asked for clarification.

Anderson nodded in response. "He thinks we're growing too fast, taking over the galaxy. A lot of aliens think that way. Most of them don't do anything about it. I'd love to see their reaction to your universe, Chief. But Saren has allied himself with the Geth. I don't know how, I don't know why. I only know it had something to do with that beacon. You and Commander Shepard were there just before the beacon self-destructed. Did either of you see anything? Any clue that might tell us what Saren was after?"

Velana stood up and frowned in thought, as she tried to recall the images. "Just before I lost consciousness, I had some kind of vision."

John stiffened in response to her words. Could she have seen the same thing he saw?

Anderson frowned. "A vision? A vision of what?" he asked.

Velana rubbed her temples, trying to relieve the minor flash of pain that arose when she started thinking about the images she'd seen. "I saw images of synthetics, geth maybe, flashing through my mind. There are several black spots in the vision that seem purposely cut out though."

"I believe I may know why, sir. I was affected by the beacon as well, and received a vision, though mine had different images. I saw organic beings, dying|tortured|butchered. There are several black spots in my vision as well." John said.

"Hmm|it sounds like this vision was cut in half and divided between the two of you. That makes things significantly harder, considering Saren got the whole picture." Anderson concluded. "We have to report this to the Council."

"What are we gonna tell them? The Chief and I had a bad dream?" Velana questioned skeptically.

"We don't know what information was stored in that beacon. Lost Prothean technology? Blueprints for some weapon of mass destruction? Whatever it was, Saren took it. But I know Saren. I know his reputation, his politics. He believes humans are a blight on the galaxy. This attack was an act of war! He has secrets from the beacon. He has an army of geth at his command. And he won't stop until he's wiped humanity from the face of the galaxy! That's how it started for you with Harvest and the Covenant, right Chief?"

John nodded in response. "The Covenant's first attack on Harvest sparked the war between us. I admit sir that this does look like a similar situation; however I would wager that if the beacon wasn't found on Eden Prime, he wouldn't have gone after the human colony. The fact that it was there, was simply an added bonus for him, and only gave him further incentive to try and destroy the colony completely."

"We'll find a way to take him down." Velana declared.

Anderson shook his head. "It's not that easy Shepard. He's a Spectre. He can go anywhere, do almost anything. That's why we need the Council on our side."

Velana nodded slowly, seeing where the captain was going with this. "We prove Saren's gone rogue and the Council will revoke his Spectre status."

Anderson nodded in confirmation. "I won't lie to either of you though. Things look bad. Nihlus is dead, the beacon was destroyed and the geth are invading. The Council's going to want answers."

"The Master Chief and I didn't do anything wrong, Captain. Hopefully the Council can see that." Velana stated respectfully.

"Yesâ€¦ that's where we have a problem, Shepard." Anderson rubbed his chin roughly, feeling the slight stubble growing back. "I don't think the Council should be made aware of the Master Chief's existence. At least, not right now."

John nodded his head. "I agree, sir. I can work more efficiently without having restrictions placed upon me or my ship. I also believe that having less people aware of myâ€¦ unique circumstances here would be for the best."

"I agree. There are a countless number of people I can think of who would kill to have the technology you possess at their disposal. And I mean that literally." Anderson said. "I'll contact the ambassador and we'll see if he can get us an audience with the Council. He'll want to see us when we reach the Citadel, but I don't think we should let Udina know about you. He's a bitâ€¦ headstrong."

John knew the type. People with positions of power that liked to display and assert it. Ackerson instantly came to mind. "If you could sir, I'd like to take the pelican back to my ship and meet up with you at the Citadel. "

"Of course. You can follow the Normandy to the system with the Mass

Relay, but we'd end up there at the same time." Anderson informed him.

"Actually sir, my ship is capable of traversing through slipspace on its own power. I can reach the Citadel on my own if you send me the coordinates." John stated.

Anderson raised an eyebrow in surprise, but figured he should have expected the Master Chief to posses advanced technology capable of such. "I see. Very well then, I'll send you the coordinates to the Citadel through your omni-tool. I'm assuming your ship will arrive first, so try and see if you can find anything out concerning Saren and Eden Prime. A Spectre as well-known as Saren should have quite a few connections, many of them on the Citadel where they can gather and report the latest news to him."

Anderson brought up his omni-tool and sent over the coordinates to the Citadel, along with the coordinates of every known Mass Relay system in the galaxy. After all, it was better to be prepared and informed just in case.

"Just send a message to your pilot to bring it up alongside the Normandy, and you can fly your dropship over." Anderson stated, actually a bit eager to see what kind of ship the Master Chief was in command of.

John held up his omni-tool in response. "The pilot is right here. Cortana, bring the Moonlight Shadow up alongside the Normandy. Open the hangar bay doors as well so I can bring the pelican in."

Cortana did not materialize herself in the com room this time, but she projected her mischievous chuckle through the omni-tool's speakers. "Oh this should be fun. Captain, please inform your pilot to glance outside the cockpit windows. I'll be dropping the cloaking field temporarily, and I'm sure he will want to see this."

Captain Anderson and Commander Shepard glanced at each other momentarily before rushing out to the cockpit to catch the view. John shook his head in amusement and followed out after them, but took the elevator back down to the Normandy's vehicle bay.

* * *

><p>Flight Lieutenant Jeff "Joker" Moreau glanced over his shoulder, slightly surprised to see both Commander Shepard and Captain Anderson behind him. They looked almostâ€¦ eager about something. "So, how did things go with the jolly green giant?"</p>

"It wasâ€¦ unexpected, but not uninteresting." Velana finally answered.

Joker scoffed at that unhelpful answer, and focused on piloting the ship. The system containing Eden Prime did not have a mass relay, which they needed to get to the Citadel. The nearest system that did, was a little over a week away, at 86 light years from their current location. "Yea well, that guy looks like he has a steel beam rammed up his ass."

"That's how all military men are, Joker. Professionalism and

discipline through and through." Velana told him with an amused smirk. She glanced out the window to Joker's left but did not see the ship yet.

"Captain Anderson isn't, and according to you, he's higher up in the food chain." Joker countered. "Besides, other than his size, there's nothing really special about him, right? I bet all that talk about him being able to scan the Normandy with his ship was just a bluff."

"We'll see in a moment, Joker. The Chief is having his pilot bring his ship up beside the Normandy to uncloak. The Master Chief's already gone down to the vehicle bay to fly his dropship over." Anderson said, also glancing out the window for any sign of the ship.

"I bet it's some broken down clunker of a cruiser that might be bigger than the Normandy, but is also inferior in terms of battleâ€ capabilitiesâ€|" Joker trailed off as a large dome of glowing hexagonal lights started retracting, revealing a massive ship that started emerging from behind it.

The ship had three large prongs at the front, with one on each side and the third resting atop the main body of the ship. And within each of those prongs was a massive gun that likely stretched the whole length of the ship, which Joker estimated to be about 4 or 5 kilometers. On the side facing the Normandy, there were over 100 missile tubes, and at least fifty large blue turrets. Both above and below the missile pods were several smaller blue turrets resembling GUARDIAN lasers, and what looked like heavy anti-fighter guns.

Near the back of the ship, where two massive wheels constantly spun in opposite directions to propel the ship, was a set of four smaller cannons, two on each side. The entire ship had a dark gray finish with numerous navy blue plates adorning the hull. All-in-all, this was a heavily armed warship that could probably rip through any Alliance fleet without difficulty.

"My godâ€!" Anderson muttered under his breath.

"Look at that monsterâ€!" Velana breathed out, unable to believe what she was seeing. There was no ship in the entire Alliance navy that even came close to matching the size of this ship, let alone the amount of firepower she could see on the thing.

"Yeahâ€| wellâ€| size isn't everything. Maneuverability is more important I think." Joker said weakly. Even he knew that ship could rip through the Normandy as if swatting an annoying fly out of the air. Hell, he wouldn't be surprised if he could dock the Normandy inside that thing.

"Still trying, huh Joker? Just admit you lost and be glad the Chief's on our side." Velana said with a smirk. "Imagine if that thing was on Saren's side."

Anderson felt a chill run down his spine that that thought. "I'd rather not. I'm impressed that it has an actual cloaking ability and enough guns to take down the Destiny Ascension if it wanted to. I just hope the Chief uses discretion when he arrives at the Citadel. We don't need any of the Council races thinking the Alliance is

planning to wage war on them."

Only then did the three of them spot the small pelican leaving the Normandy and flying into the other ship's hangar bay, passing through a glowing blue field that resembled a kinetic barrier, just before a massive door sealed itself in front of it. The massive ship was again enveloped by the dome of interlocking hexagonal shapes and disappeared from view.

"What a showoff." Joker muttered under his breath.

* * *

><p>John got off the pelican as soon as it shut down, and was brought to the bridge by Cortana. She appeared on the holopanel and smirked. "Even if I couldn't see it, I know the Normandy's pilot must have been pissed when he saw our ship."

"Anyone in this universe would be," John contested. "Captain Anderson sent us the Citadel's coordinates. How fast can we arrive?"

Cortana brought up a visual scan of the Milky Way galaxy and illuminated a red dot at the lower right portion, and another blue dot near the left side of the galaxy, halfway down. "Hmmâ€¦ it's actually pretty far from here. If we were still relying on the old UNSC Shaw-Fujikawa translight engines, it would take us almost seven years. Now? We can arrive within 4 days."

John nodded and took a seat in the Captain's chair, leaning his head back. He was still getting flashes of pain from the influx of images, and couldn't stop them from occasionally replaying inside his mind. "How much can we push the engines? Has the slipspace drive been repaired?"

"Engines are running at full capacity again, and the slipspace drive was fully repaired while you were on Eden Prime. We are green once more." Cortana replied.

"Set a course for the Citadel." John said, thankful that the images had stopped and the pain was receding.

Cortana's body color shifted from blue to violet and back again as she proceeded to do just that. "All set. Until we arrive, you should do some research so you're not going in unprepared. I've selected only the codex files I believed you'd need to know immediately. Anything else can wait for when you've got more time."

Great. Homework. Even DÃ©jÃ had not given the SPARTANS homework. She had given them milk and crackers. He withheld a sigh and brought up his omni-tool, glancing at the first entry: turians. "Of course," John muttered as the Moonlight Shadow took off into slipspace.

* * *

><p>A tall statuesque woman walked into the main chamber of the ship and coughed into her fist to make her presence known. She wore a black one-piece leather suit and a matching headdress that framed her face elegantly. "We identified the ship that touched down on Eden Prime. The Normandy. A human Alliance vessel. It was under the command of Captain Anderson. They managed to save the colony."

She said emotionlessly.

"And the beacon?" The turian sitting in the command chair asked, his voice low and threatening.

The woman's eyes glanced at the back of his chair momentarily before facing straight ahead once more. "Two people may have used it together. One confirmed human, one unknown species. Possibly human from reports of the being's stature."

The turian growled and stood up, smashing aside anything he could reach in his fury. The woman behind him had to move her head aside to avoid the thrown object as it crashed into the wall. After a few moments, the turian approached the woman and clasped her chin between his talon-tipped fingers.

"Two humans using it together means the beacon would have had to compensate. Splitting the message apart between them. This is good, as that will slow them down." The turian said more to himself than to the woman he was forcing to look at him. "Nevertheless, they must be found and they must be eliminated." This last order was directed at her, as the turian stalked off deeper into the ship, leaving the woman alone with no choice but to follow his orders.

* * *

><p>"We're exiting slipspace now, Chief."</p>

John closed the codex entry on biotics as the slipspace portal began opening before them. "I assume you've taken the necessary precautions?"

"I brought us in as close to the edge of the system as I could." Cortana confirmed. "Hopefully that's far enough away to prevent anyone seeing a massive portal opening in space. I'll send you down in the pelican and have the Moonlight Shadow standing by."

John nodded and headed to the armory first. He decided against taking any of the Forerunner weapons, and instead chose only to bring the M62 HBR and the CAWS for fighting at range or close quarters, though he hardly expected to need them at the center of galactic government.

Cortana transported him to the hangar in the now familiar flash of blue light, where he climbed into the back of a pelican. As soon as the dropship left the Moonlight Shadow, John got his first chance to see the Citadel.

And what a sight it was.

The massive structure easily dwarfed the Shadow, and was quite an impressive looking structure, with its five arms spread apart. On the inside of each arm, he could see faint orange lights, leading him to believe that each one held its own cities or population centers, perhaps even government embassies. However, he could tell just from memory recall that the halo rings were far larger than this.

As the dropship flew closer to the Citadel, something popped into John's mind. "Cortana, wouldn't someone get suspicious of a random dropship landing at a docking bay without clearance?"

"Possible, but unlikely." Cortana said, after taking a moment to consider his concern. "There are numerous ships in the system around the Citadel, whether they be human, turian, asari or salarian. It's not unthinkable that any of those ships might have sent in a crew to purchase supplies or seek medical treatment. And dropships only do what their name implies: drop off people and leave. This way, they're not taking up a docking bay for long, so it's not a problem to docking control."

Cortana brought the pelican up alongside a ship docking bay, allowing John to step out while she sent it flying back to the *_Moonlight Shadow_*. Looking around, John saw that a set of elevators was at the far end of the walkway, roughly 100 meters down from where he was dropped off. There were large metal crates scattered along the walkway, either recently delivered or waiting to be picked up.

Suddenly another ship flew in and docked itself on the opposite side of the walkway. It was a good deal larger than the *_Normandy_*, and appeared to be better armed as well. Two long orange stripes ran along the length of the ship, reminding him of the "war paint" the *_Iroquois_* had attained in the battle over Sigma Octanus IV.

Coming out of the ship were several uniformed turians, all wielding a large assortment of weapons. So this was a warship, John mused. He continued to watch them as they headed down the platform and took the left elevator down. Now that he knew which elevator led to the lower levels, he was about to follow them when the right elevator came up. Walking out was a large, heavily armed group of turians. Unlike the first group, each member of this group was wearing different armor and sported different guns than the one beside him. That meant one thing to John.

Mercenaries.

He ducked down behind one of the crates and took the HBR off his back. Were they here for him? He doubted that, as he hadn't been in this universe long enough to make enemies. But he was the only one here so who were they here for?

He glanced back at the turian ship where he saw someone else finally getting out.

A quarian.

The quarian was obviously female and had three fingers and toes on her hands and feet respectively. Her lower legs were bowed backwards significantly, compared to humans. She was covered in a full body suit with a purple hood and face mask. All-in-all, aside from hands and legs, her general body shape was similar to a human.

"There! She must be the one Saren wants dead!"

That instantly got John's attention, and he wasted no time in sprinting over to her and deploying a blue dome shield around the two of them just as the mercenaries started to fire. As expected, the large blue shield instantly stopped all projectiles being fired upon it, allowing John some time to think. Seeing that their target was well protected, the mercenaries took cover behind the assorted crates

on the walkway. The two of them would have to come out of there eventually.

John turned towards the quarian standing beside him and decided to get this out of the way now. "Why did Saren hire mercenaries to kill you?"

She looked up at him silently. She debated on whether or not to tell this giantâ€|human anything. After a few moments, she decided that if he wanted her dead, he would not have deployed a shield to save her life. "I have information Saren doesn't want leaked to anyone, especially the Council. Information that could connect him to the attack on Eden Prime."

John blinked in surprise. That was the kind of information Captain Anderson might require to have Saren's Spectre status revoked. Without that influence and the resources Saren could acquire with it, he would be much more limited in the things he could do and the moves he could make. "If I get you out of here safely, will you come with me to the human embassy and allow the ambassador to present the evidence to the Council?"

She nodded and pulled a shotgun off her back, hefting it with ease he could tell was born from experience. "Of course."

John nodded in satisfaction that the quarian would aid him and examined the situation. While the mercenaries could not shoot into the shield, he had the ability to shoot out. However, there were almost 20 turians out there who were now taking cover when they realized their shots were ineffective. Any way he looked at it, they'd have to make a run to the elevator. The more he could take out now, the less they'd have to deal with later.

He brought his HBR up and fired three shots, taking out two turians with head shots, but missing the third who ducked back behind cover. "We're going to make a run for the elevator. Don't fall behind."

The quarian nodded and fired her shotgun down the platform, blowing a turian off his feet and onto his back when he peeked around cover. "I'll keep up."

John nodded and held up three fingers with his left hand, counting down until the shield dropped. The second he reached zero, he deactivated the shield and started running down the platform, noting that the quarian was not too far behind.

The second they started running, the mercenaries popped out of cover and started firing. John ignored the shots to his shield, as the damage they were inflicting was inconsequential. He raised his HBR and put a shot through the heads of six turians within four seconds, while three more on the opposite side fell to shotgun blasts from the quarian behind him. He saw a mercenary raising a shotgun at the quarian, and fired two shots into his chest and one to the head to take him down.

The last five mercenaries regrouped just in front of the elevator, lining up their rifles in preparation to create a field of fire on the two of them. His HBR only had two shots left, so he chose to prime a plasma grenade and toss it at the closed elevator doors, landing it squarely behind the group. He stepped in front of the

quarian, letting his shield take the brunt of their fire, just as the plasma grenade blew the group apart three seconds later. Seeing that there were no more enemies in the immediate area, he took the time to eject the clip from his HBR and load in a fresh one.

"Thatâ€¢ was quite impressive," the quarian behind him admitted, staring at the spot where five turians were just eliminated in a ball of blue plasma.

John ignored her compliment and hit the button to open the elevator doors. He nudged aside a body with his foot and stepped inside, motioning for the quarian to join him. As soon as the doors closed after her, she slumped down against the wall and sighed exhaustedly.

"Keelah, that was exhausting. I've never had to run that hard before." She said tiredly.

"Do you have any injuries?" John asked her as he held out his hand.

The quarian glanced up at his hand and clasped it with hers, using it to pull herself up again. "No, I'm fine. I have you to thank for that. My name is Tali. Tali'Zorah nar Rayya." She held out her hand to him.

John nodded and shook her hand briefly. No sense in treating this quarian, who for now could be classified as a VIP NCP, with anything less than polite indifference. He needed her cooperative if he was going to have her testify against Saren. "Master Chief Petty Officer. I suppose you can call me Chief for now."

The elevator finally reached the ground floor, allowing the door to open. The area they were now looking at seemed to be an area people could gather in to enjoy the sights, which could be seen through a massive window across from them, and have private conversations as it was rather quiet in here. Actually, John had expected to see far more people in the Citadel, but this place was empty. There were no people at all.

He was starting to have a bad feeling about this location, and Chief Mendez had always told the SPARTANS to trust their gut feelings.

Tali, unaware of the Master Chief's suspicions, stepped out of the elevator before him. "Well it's a pleasure to meet you Chief. This is actually my first time on the Citadel, so if you wouldn't mind leading me to the human embassy, I'd be more than happy toâ€¢"

She was cut off as a shot pierced her left side, blood dripping out from beneath her fingers as she tried to clamp down on the wound. She leaned against the wall by the elevator, which was likely keeping her up.

John brought his HBR up and spotted a lone turian gunman deactivating some sort of personal cloaking system on the stairway. What worried John was that this system seemed to have momentarily fooled his motion sensor. The assassin tried to run down, but John took two long strides to the top of the staircase and put a round through his back, sending him crashing into a pile of bodies.

It seemed John found out why no one else was in the area. Saren's mercenaries had killed them all to work unhindered, and tossed the bodies down the stairs and out of sight.

He walked back over to the quarian and crouched down beside her to inspect the wound. It didn't seem to have hit anything vital, considering Tali was still alive, but he'd need to get her some medical attention soon. "Can you walk?"

"I-I think soâ€|" Tali pushed off the wall and took one step before staggering. She would have fallen to the ground had John not caught her in his arms. "G-Guess notâ€|"

John was frustrated, but remained silent as Tali had passed out in his arms. It seemed she had a very low pain threshold to pass out from just one shot. He lifted her up in his arms, forced to set the HBR on his back to carry her. He hoped there were no more mercenaries, as he could not fight them and protect Tali at the same time.

It seemed his luck once again came through, as just around the corner was a medical clinic. He walked right in and saw a single doctor inside with dark auburn hair staring at him in shock. He was starting to get annoyed by those looks. "This quarian has been shot. I need her alive. Can you treat her?"

The woman snapped out of her shock, seeing only a patient in need of medical attention now. "Set her on the bed over there. I need to examine the wound first."

John brushed past her and carefully set Tali down on the first bed in sight. He got a glimpse of the woman's name tag as she moved around to Tali's left side and moved her hand away. Dr. Chloe Michel.

Chloe frowned as she inspected the wound. "Polonium rounds. Highly radioactive, and almost certain death for a quarian."

"Can anything be done to save her?" John asked.

She looked up and nodded. "Yes this is easily treatable, but I'll need you to step outside while I work. I'll have to remove a portion of her suit to properly work on the wound andâ€|wellâ€|"

John took the hint and nodded. "I understand. Please let me know when her condition is stable." He turned around and exited the clinic, leaning against the wall and scanning through more codex files to pass the time.

"I'd like to know why you're the only other person alive in an empty part of the Citadel, with several bodies tossed down the nearby staircase. Several of them C-Sec. And I'd like that answer now."

John glanced to his left where a turian with blue face paint and wearing a set of dark blue armor was standing in the shadows of the med clinic.

And he was aiming a pistol straight at John's face.

* * *

><p>That's another chapter done. The reason these came out so fast was because I still had the original versions from the first time I tried to upload them, though they were unfinished. I tried to recreate them according to memory, but obviously some things have been changed and, dare I say, improved upon.</p>

As always, read and review. Let me know of any spelling or grammar issues or give me advice for future chapters, and I may implement them.

4. Chapter 4

Disclaimer: I don't own anything concerning Halo or Mass Effect in anyway.

I know people were waiting a **_long time_* for this chapter, but there is one thing you should know about me.

I'm a lore junkie.

I **LOVE** reading up on lore. Things like: background information, anatomy, culture, and history of different species, actual capabilities and number crunching for ships, weapons, abilities, and armor, etc.

For this story, I have complied over 100 different links leading to some form of research for this story. Pages from BSN (Bioware Social Network) on things like discussions and arguments over canon and lore, halo and mass effect wikia pages on different species, weapons, armor, and ships, and YouTube reference videos to be able to quote dialogue. I even wrote my own alternate ending on BSN and saved the topic to use for this story.

So, I apologize for how overdue this story is. I got so addicted to researching and looking up information, I forgot why I needed it in the first place.

Oh, I went back to the first chapter and just went ahead and added in the Binary Rifle and Scattershot.

Also, while doing some research on Super MACs, I found out they are only 1336 meters long, and are powered by generators buried on the planets' (Earth and Reach) surface. I had assumed they were far larger than that until now. Essentially, they are just a little over 1/5th the size of the _Moonlight Shadow_, which as you know, is 5km long.

The three MAC guns on the _Moonlight Shadow _run the entire length of the ship, and are powered by Forerunner dreadnought reactors. It is absolutely impossible for them to be _weaker_ than a Super MAC in this case. There is no argument or case to be made for why these three MAC guns should have a smaller yield than a Super MAC. So keep that in mind if you doubt their capabilities in this story.

* * *

><p>The second the turian ended his sentence, John's mind went into

overdrive. He quickly assessed that this turian was likely a member of some sort of military police, or security force for the Citadel. He believed John was guilty of the deaths Saren's mercenaries committed, and was ready to arrest him, with force if necessary. At this point, the turian had already made up his mind. That he was letting John answer at all, was merely a formality.<p>

So John had to force this turian to listen.

He stepped into the turian's guard, ducking down to the right to avoid the shot fired at his head, and spun around while grabbing the turian's right arm. John lifted the arm up with his left hand, and slammed his right palm up against the underside of the turian's hand, breaking his grip on the gun and likely a few bones as well.

He then jabbed his right elbow back into the turian's chest, leaving a sizable dent in the armor, and successfully knocked the wind out of the turian's lungs. Quick to take advantage over this opportunity, John kicked his right foot back against the turian's right leg, dropping him to one knee. Finally, he finished his take down by pivoting on his foot and kicking out the turian's left leg from under him, dropping him to his back, as John scooped up the pistol and aimed it squarely at the turian's head.

All-in-all, John had successfully disarmed and neutralized the turian in less than five seconds.

"I haven't been disarmed that quickly sinceâ€¦ well, I've never been disarmed before." The turian joked, his eyes never leaving the pistol barrel holding steady above his head.

"I did not kill the civilians in this area. Are you prepared to actually listen to me?" John questioned him, his finger hovering above, but not actually on, the trigger.

The turian was silent for several long moments before he finally nodded. "It doesn't seem like I have much of a choice. If you really did kill them, you wouldn't have hesitated to shoot me now. I'm Garrus Vakarian, Citadel security." The turian, now named Garrus, said while rubbing his broken hand.

"Master Chief Petty Officer. I suppose you can call me Chief, for now." John answered, lowering the pistol, and handing it back to Garrus' grip first, in a show of trust.

"Alright then Chief, I don't suppose you know who did kill those eight people, do you? And for the record, only two were civilians. The others were C-Sec officers, like me." Garrus took the pistol back and holstered it on his hip, as he pushed himself up with his left hand.

"Saren's mercenaries killed them to clear out the area. They were targeting a quarian who claimed to have some evidence against him that he doesn't want getting out." John explained.

"Saren? Saren Arterius? The Council's top Spectre?" Garrus asked in disbelief, though John easily spotted the slightly eager gleam in his eyes. "Interesting. If they actually went through all this trouble to get at her, then she must not be lying about the evidence. Did she mention what it pertains to?"

John shook his head. "No, I didn't have time to question her about it. I have a suspicion, but it's not a good idea to mention it in public. I don't think word of it has reached the Citadel yet."

Garrus nodded in agreement, but couldn't keep the smirk off his face, or what passed for one on a turian face. "Where is this quarian now?"

"Inside the clinic, being treated by Dr. Michel for polonium poisoning." John motioned with his head at the sealed clinic door behind him.

Garrus actually winced at that information. "Polonium rounds? Saren must really want her dead." Even with the golden polarized visor in the way, Garrus could tell the Chief was confused from the slight tilt of his head, and decided to clarify further. "The quarians have naturally weak immune systems. Even a few germs could cause them to become violently sick, maybe even kill them. Taking that into account, how well do you think they can handle radioactive material in their system?"

John frowned behind his helmet. Nihlus's omni-tool had limited information on the quarian people, only stating that they created the geth and were subsequently driven off their home world by those same creations. He hadn't known about this particular liability, but it made him wonder how quarians could fight while having to worry about taking any injuries. Even a grazing blow could prove fatal.

Suddenly the com system by the clinic door chimed, drawing their attention.

"_Master Chief, Tali's injury has been treated, and she is requesting to see you._" Dr. Michel said through the intercom.

John and Garrus glanced at each other, before moving into the clinic, spotting Tali resting on one of the beds, looking no worse for wear. The damage to her suit had been repaired seamlessly, with what looked like a thin patch, and only the slight difference in color let the Chief know that it had been damaged at all.

"How are you feeling, Tali?" John asked.

"I've got the makings of a fever, but at least the radiation poison has been neutralized." Tali answered, rubbing her hand over the patched portion of her suit. "It's ironic. My suit's section-seals are supposed to minimize the risk to my health, and yet they had to be removed completely so Dr. Michel could inject me with the neutralizing agent. Had she been even a few seconds too late, the agent would have been no more useful than an injection of water."

"Section-seals?" John asked curiously.

"Oh, right you wouldn't know." Tali said in understanding. "I suppose the best way to describe it would be like dropping emergency bulkheads on a ship during a hull breach. They won't stop an infection that gets into my bloodstream, but they prevent surface infections from spreading."

John nodded in silence, but was moderately impressed. The quarians had done everything they could with their suits with the sole purpose of preventing foreign contaminants entering their systems. He knew that Dr. Halsey had put at least this much work, if not more, into designing the MJOLNIR suits, and subsequently the ATHENA.

Behind John, Garrus coughed into his fist, moving around to stand beside Dr. Michel, who began applying medi-gel to his broken right hand. "Well, now that we've confirmed the quarian will recover from her injury, can she confirm your story about Saren's mercenaries killing the people in this ward? Also, does she actually have proof against Saren?"

"_The quarian_ has a name," Tali said, irritated. "It's Tali. Tali'Zorah nar Rayya**_. **And yes, if there was anyone else in the ward besides that assassin before the Chief and I arrived, then they were already dead when we got here."

"And the evidence?" Garrus pressed on, having already come to the conclusion that the Chief was innocent.

"Will have to wait until an Alliance ship from Eden Prime arrives." John said, leaving no room for argument. "I had a three day lead on them, so I'll need to protect Tali until they arrive. Once they're here, the human ambassador will arrange a meeting with the Council, where she can present her evidence."

"You think Saren will try something else, Chief?" Tali asked worriedly.

"He'd have to," Garrus confirmed. "Since the mercenaries failed to report in their success, he'll know you're still alive, and will be searching for another way to silence you before you can present the evidence. If he's really gone rogue, and the Council got word of it, he'll be stripped of his Spectre status, along with all the resources and benefits that accompany it."

"He'll be a lot easier to take down in that case." John mused.

"Wait, you're going after him? Alone?" Tali asked, shocked that the Chief would do something so rash, when he seemed so composed and in control during the earlier firefight.

"As it stands right now, no. It's highly possible the Alliance will also be searching for Saren. It's aâ€¢ unique situation." John said cautiously.

Tali carefully got out of bed, waving off Dr. Michel's protests, and stepped forward until she was directly in front of John. "I'm going with you. Saren ordered my death and is using the geth toâ€¢ do something," Tali finished quietly, remembering that he wanted the evidence to remain confidential for now.

John shook his head. "Out of the question."

Tali crossed her arms and glanced up at John in a way that let him know she had an eyebrow raised. "If you're thinking I'll be a liability, then you should scrap that thought right now. I can pull

my own weight. I'm a skilled mechanic and engineer, and I'm not exactly a civilian in terms of combat prowess. You saw me take down several mercenaries with my shotgun back there, didn't you? Besides, even if I survive long enough to present my evidence, there's no way Saren will just let that go. He might have me hunted down for the rest of my life until I'm finally killed, just for revenge. It's got to be safer with you than trying to go my own way."

John hated to admit it, but Tali made several good points, and it was hard to dispute her logic. Still, he wasn't sure he wanted or needed another crew member. Cortana could handle the operations of the entire ship without losing her ability to aid him groundside. But there was that small part of him that wanted to be able to fight beside people he could trust to watch his back. It had been so long since he fought alongside other SPARTANS. Had he been given the choice, he'd have always chosen to fight as a part of Blue Team, rather than alone.

"What do you think Cortana?" John asked.

"What possible downside could there be to letting her aboard the ship if she wants to help take down this bastard? Loss of your solitude? Oh no, can't have that can we, Chief? Got to shoulder the burden alone, right?" Cortana asked jokingly, though her concern for his well-being could easily be discerned through her tone of voice.

John sighed softly, as he could practically see the smirk on her face, but was also aware that Cortana was always worried for him when he had to fight alone. She'd be far more at ease, if she knew he had someone to watch his back in combat. And he had to admit, Tali was pretty good with a shotgun. "Is there anything specific the ship would need to accommodate you?"

"Well, I'd need food for a dextro-protein species. I can't eat food that humans, asari and salarians can. Your food will, at best, be inedible and at worst, poisonous; most likely triggering a dangerous allergic reaction." Tali said, making sure to stress how important this was. "Other than that, nothing in particular."

Dr. Michel cleared her throat, finally finding a topic she could chime in on. "If you're picking up things for your ship, I would be willing to sell you medi-gel or other medical supplies."

"Medi-gel?" John muttered. He brought up his omni-tool and quickly scanned through it until he found the codex entry on it. The more he read, the more interested he became, as it was obvious medi-gel outstripped biofoam in terms of usefulness. He'd have to see if he could replace the biofoam dispensers in his armor with medi-gel later. "Dr. Michel, do you sell medi-gel dispensers here?"

Chloe shook her head. "Unfortunately, no. However, you can buy them from Morlan down in the lower markets. Once you have them, I can supply you with medi-gel packets to fill them."

John nodded and moved to exit the clinic until Garrus stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Until this whole Saren business is resolved, I'll be sticking around. I want to be there when the evidence is presented to see that smug look on Saren's face just slide right off."

"Fair enough." John said, walking out of the clinic with Garrus and Tali following him.

* * *

><p>"Hello there. Welcome to Morlan's famous shop. You want many good supplies, yes?"</p>

John nodded, ignoring the multitude of wide-eyed stares directed at him from the other people in the lower markets. From the moment he, Garrus, and Tali had walked down those stairs, all eyes had been on them, and not a single set had glanced away yet.

"I need medi-gel dispensers and rations for dextro-protein species." John said.

"Ah, you are in luckâ€| human?" Morlan asked, not sure what species the large being in green armor was. He shook it off and pressed on. Credits were all the same, no matter who was providing them. "I have two medi-gel dispensers left in stock. Top of the line, I assure you. Their capacity has been improved 20% over last year's model, and are now able to store 1000 medi-gel packets at a time!"

"If we're getting injured that much, we'll have bigger things to worry about than running out of medi-gel," Tali whispered to the chief.

"I'll take them," John said, pushing Tali's statement to the back of his mind. It was doubtful he'd ever need that much medi-gel. However, should he ever need to bring injured personnel aboard the ship, it would be beneficial to have the medical supplies necessary to treat them. For that, he'd probably also need a medical officer to maintain the infirmary. "And the rations?"

"Ah, yes of course." Morlan crouched down behind the counter and lifted two large boxes up which were obviously the medi-gel dispensers, judging from the labels on the side, and set them down in front of the group of three. "Naturally the rations are not kept here, as I could not provide adequate storage for them. You may place your order here, and I will transmit it, to have the rations delivered to the docking bay of your choice. As for the dispensers, the price for both comes to a total of 3400 credits."

"3400 credits?!" Tali asked in shock. "That's practically robbery, you greedy bosh'tet!"

"Uh, Tali? It's generally not wise to curse the person selling you something you need, especially a salarian." Garrus whispered to the quarian. He knew it was overcharged. Outrageously so, but he also knew Morlan. The salarian would only be doing this if he knew for **sure, **that they were sold out everywhere else in this part of the Citadel.

"Cortana, do we have that much?" John asked, shutting off his exterior mic to prevent the others from hearing them.

"Chief, we have several hundred million credits in the account weâ€| inherited from Nihlus. We can afford these easily." Cortana reassured him.

John raised his left arm, which glowed bright orange as the omni-tool was activated by Cortana. A soft ping sound let him know the funds had been transferred from his account into Morlan's. "How much will the rations cost me?"

Morlan rubbed his chin in thought. "Wellâ€¦ that would depend on the quality you wish to purchase. The finest dextro ingredients would run you upwards of 3000 credits a crate. But you can just get a carton of turian nutrient paste tubes for a mere 200 credits. They'll last you much longer."

"Ah, Chief? Just a warningâ€"the nutrient paste tastes like strainedâ€ droppings." Garrus chimed in, remembering the first time he had tasted the stuff. He understood the necessity of providing military forces with a quick, nutrient-filled food source, but what was the point if they couldn't even keep it down to be digested?

John gave Garrus's words some consideration, since Tali would be the one actually eating it. The standard MREs the UNSC provided tasted like pretty decent food. It wasn't anything to praise, but neither was it bad enough to warrant complaints. This nutrient paste sounded much worse. In the end, he just decided to order a year's supply of ingredients that could be stored in the mess hall, and told Morlan to have them sent to docking bay D42. They weren't five star restaurant quality, but they would at least taste edible.

Picking up the medi-gel dispensers, John, Garrus, and Tali headed through the lower markets and back towards the med clinic to purchase the medi-gel packets from Dr. Michel. After that, John would head to the docking bay and bring everything back to the ship. He had to allow Tali to familiarize herself with the ship if she was going to be joining him.

* * *

><p>"So Chief, I can't help but notice that there's no ship here." Garrus commented, looking at the empty docking bay. The one behind him still had a turian ship, but Tali confirmed that the chief had not arrived on it.</p>

"I didn't want to bring the ship in where others could see it. It's also too large to actually dock here, so we're going to have to take a dropship up." John answered, waiting for the pelican to arrive. As always, Cortana's timing was impeccable, as the dark gray pelican arrived less than a minute later, dropping the back hatch to allow them entry.

Garrus and John carried in the crates of food, while Tali brought in the medi-gel dispensers and packets they'd bought from Dr. Michel, at the discounted price of 1200 credits for 2000 packets. "Chief there's no one piloting this dropship. How did it get down here?"

John set the food down along the left side of the pelican, before answering Tali. "Cortana can remotely pilot the dropship from the Moonlight Shadow, while still managing all its regular functions."

Garrus let out a low, impressed whistle. "Now I'm even more eager to see this ship. Too big to dock at the Citadel, able to remotely

pilot a dropship from extreme distances, all you need is a powerful main gun and I'll be satisfied."

"How about _three_ main guns?" Cortana asked through John's omni-tool speakers.

"Now you're just teasing me with information like that," Garrus joked.

The pelican's hatch sealed up behind them as the dropship left the docking bay, heading, not out and away from the Citadel like John expected, but turning around to fly alongside one of the Citadel's arms towards the large ring that connected the five arms together. "Cortana, where did you move the ship?" John asked, confused by their current course.

"It's waiting for you behind the Citadel, well out of visual and scanning range. ETA is five minutes. Dropping the cloaking now."

Garrus sat himself down in the pilot's seat while Tali took the co-pilot's seat above him. As the pelican flew farther away from the Citadel, and the fleet surrounding the front of the superstructure, they saw a large dome of hexagonal lights retracting, revealing an _enormous_ ship that started emerging from behind it. Garrus's mouth, and the mandibles on either side of it, hung open in shock as he took in the three _massive_ cannons attached to the ship. That was in addition to the hundreds of turrets and missile tubes he saw on the sides as well. "Thatâ€¢ is impressive."

"I-Impressive? That's all you have to say?!" Tali asked in disbelief. "This is the most beautiful ship I've ever seen! It could probably wipe out the entire Citadel fleet alone! I can only imagine the technology contained inside."

"You won't have to imagine for much longer. I'm bringing the dropship into the hangar now." Cortana informed them.

* * *

><p>John was relieved to finally see the bridge doors. After the pelican had docked on the Shadow, Tali and Garrus had wanted to stay in the hanger, inspecting the booster frames and SAVs, until John finally told them they'd find out more by heading further into the ship.

John opened the doors and allowed Garrus and Tali onto the bridge, watching them marvel at the beautiful view through the window at the front, until they began walking around the room, inspecting the various consoles and equipment.

"Chief, this technology is amazing! This ship is more advanced than every ship in the Migrant Fleet _combined_!" Tali exclaimed.

"And I thought the _Destiny Ascension_ was impressive," Garrus agreed. "A shot from one of those main guns could take down any dreadnought in the turian fleet, and probably even a second as well."

"Even without knowing the specs of a turian dreadnought, and based

solely on what I know about the Shadow's MAC guns, I estimate that a shot from one of them could tear through at least three." Cortana said, as she materialized herself on the holopad by the Captain's chair. "Oh, where are my manners? I'm Cortana, the Moonlight Shadow's AI, and technically, pilot."

For a moment, all was silent on the bridge, as the two guests aboard the Shadow stared at the luminescent form of Cortana. Then Tali unslung the shotgun from her waist and aimed it squarely at Cortana, only to realize the Chief now had his rifle aimed at her.

"Chief, an AI hacked its way onto your ship! If you give me access to the ship's controls, I may be able to lock it out of critical systems!" Tali exclaimed.

"Tali, that's Cortana. And she didn't infiltrate the Shadow, she runs the ship." John explained, keeping his HBR trained on Tali. He had acted on instinct at first, but now, he didn't like the fact that Tali had pulled a gun on Cortana. At all.

"You let it run the ship? Chief, are you crazy? An AI with this kind of firepower at its disposal could wreak untold amounts of destruction!" Tali replied in shock. "What if the next time you take a pelican up to this ship, it decides it doesn't need you anymore, and shoots you down?"

Now John was starting to get annoyed. "First, Cortana is a she, not an it. And second, Cortana has been my partner and friend for the better part of seven years. She's saved me countless times, and her help has always been invaluable. If she wanted to kill me, she's had countless opportunities to do so, but she hasn't."

Tali remained silent at the Chief's revelations, but kept her shotgun trained firmly on the projection of the AI. True, seven years was an unusually long period of time for an AI to remain stable, and Tali could quite clearly hear inflections of actual emotion in the AI's... Cortana's voice, which was beyond unprecedented. It was believed impossible, even by the quarians.

However, Tali also knew what AI were capable of if they rebelled. The Chief had seen the results on Eden Prime for himself! She glanced over at Garrus, who had kept quiet all this time. "Garrus... what do you think? Your people have no history with AI like mine. Plus, you're a member of C-Sec. You know AI are illegal in Council space. So, what's your opinion on...Cortana?"

Garrus's mandibles opened and closed briefly as he considered the AI named Cortana before him. "I don't have a problem with the AI... pardon me, Cortana." Garrus said, with an apologetic nod towards Cortana, who returned it with an amused smile on her face.

"If she really was a threat, she wouldn't have had any qualms about shooting the dropship down as we approached. And considering how advanced the rest of the Chief's technology is, do you really find it so hard to believe that an AI working alongside him would be advanced enough to remain stable?" Garrus asked rhetorically. "I'm not going to report to the Council about one AI, when there are far more important things for them to be concerned about."

John said nothing to him, but he was relieved that Garrus was more

accepting of Cortana and wouldn't report her existence. "Tali, Cortana is my friend, and she has more claim to this ship than I do. If you want to come with me, you're going to have to get used to having an AI onboard."

Tali glanced from the Chief to Cortana, as she considered her options. What she said earlier had been true. It was highly unlikely that Saren would just stop trying to kill her. She had evidence against him, and even if she never handed it over or presented it, he'd probably have her killed just on principle. Now that she had actually seen the *Moonlight Shadow*, Tali was much more confident that she'd be safer here with the Chief, rather than trying to find a different ship. Not many other Captains would allow a Quarrian aboard their ship, regardless of what contributions she could provide.

"I can't say I'm pleased, but I can at least be sure Saren can't reach me here. There's also the fact, that the wealth of technology on this ship interests me." Tali's decision was made, when she lowered her shotgun and set it on the back of her waist once more.

John nodded and set the HBR on his back again. He actually found himself slightly relieved, that Tali was able to set aside whatever problems she had against AI, or perhaps more specifically, against Cortana, and chose to stay.

"Well then Tali, welcome aboard the *Moonlight Shadow*. *Would you mind bringing the medi-gel dispensers to the medbay? I will direct you there.*" Cortana said amicably.

Tali nodded and took the two boxes and the medi-gel packets from the Chief and Garrus respectively, and headed back out the bridge doors.

* * *

><p>"Take a left at the next corridor, Tali. Just for future reference, taking a right here would lead you to the cryo bay." Cortana said, her voice echoing through the ship's corridor.<p>

"Noted," Tali said stiffly, still not comfortable around an AI. What made it worse, was that Cortana sounded like an actual person, making Tali feel slightly guilty for acting so cold to the AI. She had to keep reminding herself that Cortana was not alive, or she might actually apologize.

When she passed through the door at the end of the corridor, Tali found herself in a decontamination chamber outside the second door that actually lead into the medbay. From above Tali's head, a wave of orange light came down, surrounding her in a large dome that encompassed the decontamination chamber. It vanished in an instant, and the second set of doors unlocked, allowing her entry to the medbay.

As soon as Tali stepped inside, that same orange light came down again, though obviously the dome was larger, and filled the entire medbay in its glow. When the light faded, Tali set down the medi-gel dispensers and was free to inspect the room. And just as she expected, it was as amazing as the rest of the ship.

There were ten different beds, with some sort of anesthesia station mounted on the walls above the beds, as she could clearly see attached masks. There was a polished silver desk, a comfortable looking chair in front of it, and a large wall-mounted storage container, probably meant to contain medical supplies. At the far back were a multitude of devices, whose purposes she couldn't even begin to fathom. Finally, there was also some sort of large glass canister containing an unknown red liquid. It looked thicker than blood, and seemed to be moving inside the canister. Tali wasn't sure if she wanted to know what that liquid was.

"Cortanaâ€| what was that orange beam I was hit by twice? I've never seen a decontamination system like that before." Tali inquired hesitantly, almost as if it were a crime to ask the AI a question.

"That was a micro-burst of radiation projected by a sterile field generator, designed to irradiate the nearby area, eliminating micro-organisms and bacteria that could cause an infection._" _Cortana explained.

Behind her mask, Tali's eyes widened in surprise. "Waitâ€"are you actually implying that these generators canâ€""

"â€"provide a 100% sterile environment within their effective range? Why, yes I am. The medbay, and all who enter, are guaranteed to be 100% sterile." Cortana confirmed with pride.

Tali remained silent, considering the implications of that statement. Standard decontamination systems used chemicals filtered through a ventilation system, to remove foreign contaminants and bacteria, but it was never a guaranteed success. There was always a chance that something could get inside one of the Migrant Fleet's ships, which would pose a serious risk to quarians. Especially if it was one of the liveships, which provided the majority of their food.

The use of radiation to decontaminate had been considered before, but the results always ended up with either a lethal dose, or harmful side effects. Could it really be possible, that a perfected version was functioning on the Shadow?

Not trusting Cortana's word on the matter, Tali ran a program installed on her omni-tool to check the air for anything that could pose a threat to her health. To her surprise, the results on her omni-tool confirmed Cortana's claim. The air in the medbay was safe for her to breathe without her mask's air filter.

"Incredible... Cortana, what's the effective range of these generators?" Tali asked eagerly.

"The generator in the medbay is a larger model, and has an effective radius of up to one hundred meters, whereas the portable version in the attached chamber, which would normally be carried onto the battlefield by medical personnel for on-site treatment, only has an effective radius of about thirty meters." Cortana replied.

Portable generators? For sterile medical treatment on the battlefield? Perhaps, Tali considered, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to serve on a ship containing an AI.

* * *

><p>While Garrus had gone back to the Citadel on a pelican remotely piloted by Cortana, as he still had duties with C-Sec to uphold, John had helped Tali acclimate to the ship over the next three days, showing her the places he considered most important, including: the cryo bay, armory, mess hall, crew barracks, and engineering sections.</p>

That had been the first time Tali had met a Huragok. When John had explained about their natural talents with repairing and improving upon anything mechanical or electrical, Tali took it upon herself to test their skills in comparison to her own.

Though Tali was certainly quite skilled, she had easily been outdone by the engineers.

Whilst in the armory, Tali had been introduced the forerunner equivalent of a shotgun, the Scattershot. Though for obvious reason the gun couldn't be fired on the ship, Cortana had generously provided Tali the gun's specs and capabilities, highlighting its most distinct feature: the ricocheting projectiles.

Needless to say, not only had Tali instantly swapped out her old shotgun for a new Scattershot, she then created a program for her omni-tool to display the gun's projectile trajectories, to accurately make use of the Scattershot's schismatic dispersal effect. While currently untested, Tali had high hopes that this program would assist her in taking out enemies behind cover.

After becoming intimately familiar with the Moonlight Shadow, Tali had ultimately decided she would be of most use manning the Ops station on the bridge, where she could monitor the status of the ship's engines and slipspace drive at all times.

* * *

><p>"That Alliance ship arrives today, doesn't it Chief?"</p>

"Yes, the Normandy." John confirmed. "Captain Anderson contacted me earlier, and informed me that Ambassador Udina has convinced the Council to grant them an audience. He's asked me to head over to the human embassy, now that Udina's stepped out for the afternoon."

"If the Council agreed to an audience, it'll be in a couple of hours, after they've had their own sources thoroughly investigate the situation on Eden Prime. They'll also contact Saren, as he's the one being accused." Garrus informed him.

Currently, John, Garrus, and Tali were in Dr. Michel's clinic, discussing how they were going to proceed with the evidence from here. It was a place that Garrus assured they'd be guaranteed privacy. Cortana had even swept the room for bugs and found nothing, confirming Garrus's claim.

"As long as I hand the evidence over to Captain Anderson, we'll know for sure it will make it to the meeting with the Council." John asserted. Should Saren make another attempt to eliminate Tali, not that John would allow it, there would be a copy of the evidence ready

and waiting.

"Well, let's not keep the good Captain waiting." Tali said, impatient to hand over the recording. Just having it in her possession made her feel as if a giant target was painted on her back.

John and Garrus nodded in agreement, and the three of them headed out of the clinic towards the embassies, though John activated his armor's active camouflage shortly after exiting. He didn't want to attract attention as he headed into the part of the citadel that housed all the diplomatic representatives.

* * *

><p>A man, standing by the stairs leading up to Flux, clicked on his com after the group of three had left the area. "Boss, the quarian you told us to watch out for just left the clinic, but she's got protection now."</p>

"_What _kind_ of protection?"_ A voice asked impatiently, through the earpiece in the man's ear.

"She's got some turian from C-Sec and a huge guy in green armor." The man reported, managing to get a glimpse of the three, as they headed into the elevator leading up to the presidium.

"_Does the turian have navy blue facial markings?"_

"Yeah, that's him boss."

"_Garrus, then. Damn turian has been trying to bring me in for months now. Alright, I'm sending up Davin and the others to help. You're going to grab the doctor, and bring her back here. We'll force Garrus to trade the quarian for the doctor's life. He's always had a soft spot for her, and I can use that to my advantage."_

"What about that other guy? He's pretty big boss, and he looks dangerous." The man questioned.

"_You're worried about one person? Don't be stupid. You know how many mercs I've got in my employ? And don't forget, if we can get the quarian's omni-tool before the meeting with the Council, Saren's going to pay me really well."_

The man frowned, as he cautiously walked through the upper market and towards the door to the ward where the clinic was located. Thankfully that area was still deserted. "See, that's the thing. Are you sure it's a good idea to be double dealing like this? Especially against the Shadow Broker? There's no way he won't find out."

"_I will admit, he certainly lives up to his reputation, but that same reputation has people overestimating him now. He's not going to find out about this, I'll make sure of it. Trust me, I wouldn't be risking my neck if the pay wasn't worth my efforts. Spectres have deeper pockets than most, and Saren's willing to empty his out for that quarian's omni-tool."_

The man was about to respond, but when he saw several C-Sec officers passing through the area, he quickly ducked back through the doors and moved over to a volus's kiosk, acting as if he was interested in

purchasing something. "There's C-Sec activity in the area, boss."

The com was silent for a few moments before new instructions came through. _"That's a complication, but easy to work around. Wait for Davin and the others to get up there, and 'extend an invitation' to the good doctor. Don't expect any pay unless you're bringing back a guest to my club."_

The mic cut out suddenly, leaving the man no chance to reply. "Understood," he muttered under his breath, as he bought a copy of Fornax and started to read, while he waited for the rest of Fist's enforcers to show up.

* * *

><p>As soon as the doors to the human embassy sealed behind him, John deactivated his active camouflage and saluted Captain Anderson. "It's good to see you again, sir."</p>

"At ease, Chief. And the feeling is mutual. I trust you've enjoyed your stay aboard the Citadel?" Anderson asked cordially.

"It's beenâ€| eventful, to say the least, sir." John answered neutrally.

Anderson nodded, and shifted his glance over to Tali. "I don't believe we've met, missâ€|"

"Tali. Tali'Zorah nar Rayya. I've agreed to hand over the evidence in my possession that links Saren to the geth attack on Eden Prime." She said respectfully.

Anderson's interest was piqued. "Perhaps you'd better start at the beginning, Tali."

Tali nodded and wrung her hands together nervously, trying to decide how best to start her story. "I was on my pilgrimage, my rite of passage into adulthood."

"If you're currently on your pilgrimage, is it really alright for you to come with me, Tali?" John asked curiously.

"Being on your ship is probably the best place I could be, to complete my pilgrimage." Tali replied. "You see, it's a tradition among the quarians to leave the ships of our parents and our people when we reach maturity. Alone, we search the stars, only returning to the flotilla once we have discovered something of value."

Now John began to understand. "What qualifies as something of value? Weapons?"

"Not necessarily," Tali answered. "It could be anything from resources, like food or fuel, useful technology, or even knowledge that will make life easier on the flotilla. The goal of the pilgrimage is to prove we can contribute to our community, rather than being a burden on our limited resources."

"Please, tell us what you found, Tali." Anderson requested, wanting to get to the actual evidence. Though it was interesting, that the

Chief had accepted a quarian onto his ship when many others would not. Given his situation, it was understandable. The Chief did not carry the prejudice for quarians that so many others possessed.

Tali nodded. "During my travels, I began hearing reports of geth. Since they drove my people into exile, the geth have never ventured beyond the veil."

"So naturally, you wanted to investigate," Garrus concluded easily.

"Correct." Tali confirmed. "I tracked a patrol of geth to an uncharted world, and waited for one to become separated from its unit. Then I disabled it, and removed its memory core."

"I thought the geth fried their memory cores when they died," Anderson said in confusion. "Some kind of defense mechanism."

"You're right. However, my people created the geth. If you're quick, careful, and lucky, small caches of data can be saved." Tali explained.

"Or if you happen to have a brilliant AI in your suit that can interface with any hardware or software in existence." Cortana said through John's omni-tool with no false modesty, prompting an eye roll from John and an amused grin from both Anderson and Garrus.

"Most of the core was wiped clean, but I salvaged something from its audio banks." Tali raised her left arm from her side, and input commands on her omni-tool. Moments later, a recorded voice began playing through the embassy, one which both Garrus and Captain Anderson instantly recognized, having heard it numerous times in their life.

"_Eden Prime was a major victory. The beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the conduit._"

Garrus smirked victoriously. "That was definitely Saren. I'd recognize that voice anywhere."

Captain Anderson nodded in agreement, with a small grin of his own tugging at his lips. "That's Saren's voice, all right. This proves he was involved in the attack."

"Sir, what is thisâ€| conduit Saren mentioned? It sounds like he perpetrated the attack for the sole purpose of finding it." John said.

"The conduit must have something to do with the beacon. Maybe it's some prothean technologyâ€| like a weapon." Anderson reasoned.

"Wait, there's more." Tali interjected. "Saren wasn't working alone." She tapped in a new command on her omni-tool and replayed the recording, though this time there was a second person speaking after Saren, in a distinctly female voice.

"Eden Prime was a major victory. The beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the conduit."

"_And one step closer, to the return of the reapers."_

"I don't recognize that second voice, the one that mentions reapers," Anderson said.

John brought up his omni-tool, which Cortana had activated once more. "Cortana, do we have any information on theseâ€| reapers?"

"Nothing. No entries, no references, not even a passing remark or comment." Cortana replied in frustration.

John glanced over at Tali after Cortana's response. "Tali, have you heard of them before?"

"Well, according to the memory core, the reapers were a hyper-advanced machine race, that existed 50,000 years ago. The reapers hunted down the protheans to total extinction, and then they vanished! At least, that's what the geth believe." Tali amended.

"Hmmâ€| I'm not sure about a machine race, but these 'reapers' might have been a set of extremely destructive weapons that could have led to the end of the prothean race. After all, anything called a reaper has to be dangerous." Garrus theorized.

Then John remembered the partial vision the beacon had implanted in his mind. "Sir, the vision Commander Shepard and I shared. Could she have seen these reapers, while I saw the protheans being slaughtered?"

Anderson frowned, as that did make a good bit of sense. He definitely didn't like the implications of a hyper-advanced machine race that supposedly wiped out the protheans returning. "I'll admit it's certainly possible, Chief. But we won't know anything concrete until we find out the purpose of this conduit Saren's searching for."

"Based on the data I scavenged from the memory core, it seems like the geth revere the reapers as gods, the pinnacle of non-organic life. And they believe Saren knows how to bring the reapers back." Tali said, consulting her omni-tool.

"An ancient race causing in the extinction of another? Where have we heard that before, Chief?" Cortana asked John sarcastically.

Even if these reapers were twice as dangerous as the flood, this time John was prepared and ready for them.

"No matter what they think about the rest of this, those audio files prove Saren's a traitor!" Anderson said triumphantly. "Chief, the Council will reconvene soon, probably no longer than an hour from now, where we can present this evidence directly. Saren will undoubtedly make an appearance, so if you want to come watch his expression when he hears this, make sure you've got that cloaking system active."

John gave a nod to Tali, who transferred the recording to Captain Anderson's omni-tool. "We'll be back in an hour then, sir."

As they were leaving the embassies, Garrus noticed he'd received a delayed message on his omni-tool from Dr. Michel. The three of them were in the elevator down to the wards, when he played the message.

"_We have the doctor. If you want her back alive and unharmed, bring the quarian to Chora's Den within the next hour. Otherwise, we won't be able to guarantee her safety._"

"Fist," Garrus muttered furiously.

"Who's Fist?" John asked.

"He's a known crime lord on the Citadel, and the owner of a club down in the wards called Chora's Den." Garrus explained. "You name it, and he's done it. Weapon smuggling, drug trafficking, bribing officials, murder, Fist has done it all, or hired people to do it for him. I've been trying to bring him in for a while, but he's got people inside C-Sec. I've never been able to get any hard evidence on his crimes, and I haven't been able to figure out who he's got working for him in C-Sec either."

"He said he wants me within the next hour," Tali repeated. "Doesn't that imply he's doing this on Saren's orders? The meeting with the Council should occur an hour from now, right?"

"That's the only logical explanation," Garrus agreed. "But Fist is also a known agent for the Shadow Broker, the biggest information broker in the galaxy. And he doesn't look too kindly on agents that double deal against him. It's practically suicide."

"Money has always been known to sway loyalties," Cortana chimed in.

"Saren must be pretty desperate, if he's paying enough credits to tempt one of the Shadow Broker's agents." Garrus said.

"I assume, we're going to go get the doctor back?" John asked rhetorically, as he grabbed the HBR from his back.

Garrus glanced at Tali, who hefted her new Scattershot shotgun in her arms, and pulled his own assault rifle out just as the elevator doors opened, bringing them onto the lower wards. "I suppose we could go pay Fist a visit."

* * *

><p>John, Tali, and Garrus had made their way through the lower wards until they reached the entrance to Chora's Den. "Looks like it's shut down," Garrus commented.</p>

"Then Fist is expecting us," John replied. The doors were sealed, but John picked up at least four red blips on his motion sensor on the other side of the door. He highly doubted that was all of them.

"Chief?"

John spun around, leveling his HBR in the process, but lowered it when he spotted Commander Shepard, Lieutenant Alenko, and a rather

large alien he recognized from the codex entry as a krogan. He would have snapped off a salute, but as they were a only one door away from hostiles, he settled for a respectful nod in her direction, which she understood and returned.

John turned around so his back was no longer facing the entrance to the club. "With all due respect, may I ask what you're doing here, ma'am?"

Velana gestured towards the krogan with her head. "This is Urdnot Wrex. He's told me he knows where to find evidence incriminating Saren in the Eden Prime attack. In exchange, I'm helping him get to Fist."

"Shepard," the krogan cut in. "That quarian there has your evidence. I still expect you to uphold your end of the bargain though. The Shadow Broker doesn't pay me unless I actually take care of Fist myself."

"I see. The Shadow Broker hired you to deal with Fist, when he discovered the man was double dealing." Garrus said in realization.

Wrex nodded, tightening his grip on the shotgun cradled in his arms.

"Commander, Tali here has already passed on the evidence to Captain Anderson. We're here, because Fist has taken a doctor from the wards hostage." John informed her.

"Seems like we're all here for the same person then." Velana remarked. "Shall we invite ourselves in?"

John nodded and took up a position on the right side of the door, while Velana took the left. She held up three fingers and started dropping them one by one. When the count had ended, John entered the club and immediately dropped a man behind the bar who had started drawing his pistol.

Velana entered next and took down a man above the bar, where several poles attached to the ceiling were located for dancers. By now, Fist's men were aware that intruders had entered the club, and were armed and dangerous. Several took potshots at John and Shepard, but the two of them had found cover behind the backs of two different booths.

By mutual agreement, they decided to take opposite sides of the club, which curved around to the back, where the door leading to Fist's private room was located. Tali and Garrus quickly moved over to the Chief and took cover behind the booth, while Kaidan and Wrex did the same with Shepard.

"Perfect chance to try this out." Tali brought up her omni-tool and activated the program she'd created to track the Scattershot's individual projectile trajectories. Instantly, she saw numerous numbers and factors flash by on the inside of her mask. She peeked around the booth, took aim at two men in one of the sections designed for private dances, and fired. Five orange glowing projectiles shot out and pierced through the chests of both men.

Now that she had finally fired the Scattershot, the program could auto-adjust to her weapon and begin mapping out ricochet angles. She was pulled back down into cover by the Chief, just barely avoiding a shot that would have pierced through her helmet. When she checked for the location of the person who'd shot at her, she spotted a krogan near the back of the club, hiding by one of the booths.

Tali raised the Scattershot over her current cover, and the program displayed on her mask told her to aim for the top portion of the bar, in order for her shots to be reflected at the proper angle. Sure enough, when she fired, all five glowing projectiles hit the upper rim of the bar and bounced back down, piercing the krogan through the chest in five different places. What surprised Tali however, was that the krogan's body thenâ€| disintegrated into orange glowing particles of light.

"I didn't know it could do thatâ€|" Tali said in amazement.

"I might have to get myself one of those," Garrus remarked, as he bolted out from around cover and put a burst from his assault rifle into the heads of three different mercs.

Just as John was about to take down the last target on this side of the club, the man was tackled into the wall by the Commander's krogan companion, who then delivered a point-blank shotgun blast to the man's stomach, painting the wall behind him red and dropping him instantly.

The two separate teams met up at the entrance to the backroom and as one, proceeded inside. They were met by a pair of civilians who had clumsily aimed a set of pistols at the group of six.

"Stop right there! Don't come any closer!" One of them ordered.

"Warehouse workers." Garrus observed. "We must have killed all the real guards."

"Stay back or we'll shoot!" The second one threatened.

Velana held up a hand, to tell the others to stand down. There was no need to kill an obviously scared pair of civilians. "Just a heads upâ€"this would be a good time to find somewhere else to work."

The two civilians, relieved that they were being given a way out, lowered their pistols and nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, right. That's a good idea."

"Yeah, I never liked Fist anyway." The two of them hastily left without another word.

"It would've been quicker to just kill them," Wrex said.

"Shooting people isn't always the answer," Garrus replied.

"No, but it's the fun one." Wrex said, with a grin that slightly unnerved Tali.

Velana shook her head in amusement and took point, heading towards the door in the back. As soon as she entered, she realized that this

was Fist's personal office. The silver desk at the back was overturned, and two panels on the walls slid back to reveal security turrets.

Before either one could get off a shot, Kaidan remotely short-circuited one of them, while Tali hacked into the other and triggered an automatic self-destruct, reducing it to little more than scrap metal.

From behind the desk, Fist emerged, with one arm held around Dr. Michel while the other had a pistol aimed at her right temple. "Drop your guns, all of you! You make one move I don't like, and the good doctor gets an injury even she won't be able to treat."

All six of them had their guns aimed squarely at Fist, though none of them moved or fired.

"I say, just shoot. He's got nowhere to run from here," Wrex said.

"We're not shooting Dr. Michel. We came here to rescue her." Garrus countered.

"You came to rescue her. I get paid as long as Fist is dead." Wrex replied.

"Shut up! If you don't want to see her dead, you're going to let me walk out of here and get to the docking bays!" Fist yelled.

John kept his sights locked on Fist's right hand, which held the pistol aimed at Dr. Michel. If he could land one well-placed shot on that hand, Fist would release the doctor, and be left without leverage over them. John would've liked to just take the man down directly, but Fist kept moving his head behind the doctor's. He'd been trained to never put the life of a civilian or hostage in danger, if it could be avoided. His moment of opportunity came when Fist tilted his hand forward, exposing the back to John. He took the shot and blew a hole straight through Fist's right hand, forcing him to drop the pistol.

Dr. Michel capitalized on the opportunity, elbowing her captor in the stomach and escaped over towards the group, while Wrex stalked over to the injured club owner.

"The Shadow Broker says goodbye," Wrex announced, as he pressed his shotgun up beneath Fist's chin and blew a hole straight through the top of his head, watching the body intently, as it dropped to the ground.

John wanted to say something about killing a disarmed opponent in cold blood, but knew well enough to realize his words would be wasted. Commander Shepard had obviously accepted the consequences of the Krogan's help, and it was quite obvious how the Krogan in question felt about the deed.

"Wellâ€¦ all's well that ends well?" Tali asked, trying to lighten the mood.

* * *

><p>"Are you sure you're alright, Dr. Michel?" Garrus asked for the fifth time in a row.</p>

"Yes, Garrus. I wasn't harmed at all." Dr. Michel said for the fifth time in a row.

While Commander Shepard, Kaidan and Wrex had headed up to the presidium for the meeting with the Council, Garrus had insisted on escorting Dr. Michel back to her clinic safely first, something which neither John nor Tali had a problem with.

Dr. Michel turned towards the Chief. "Master Chief, I want to thank you for saving me. And, I'd like to ask a favor, if I may."

"Of course, doctor." John agreed.

Dr. Michel looked down, not sure how to ask this. "Chief, I thought I would die today. I've treated thousands of patients, seen the bloodiest, most horrific injuries, but this was the first time I've actually felt afraid. Iâ€"I don't think I could feel safe on the Citadel after this. Do you, by any chance, have need for a medical officer aboard your ship?" She asked somewhat hopefully.

John didn't even need to consider it. "Welcome aboard doctor."

"Wait, why does she get an instant yes, whereas I had to actually convince you to take me along?" Tali demanded.

John glanced at her, while Dr. Michel began gathering up medical supplies she'd take with her. "Dr. Michel won't be going into combat."

"Fair point," Tali said, conceding the point.

* * *

><p>Garrus and Tali walked up the stairs towards Captain Anderson, who'd obviously been waiting for them. "Captain," Garrus greeted.</p>

"Garrus. Tali. Did the Chief come with you?" Anderson asked, trying to discern the Chief's cloaked form around the duo, but didn't see that subtle distortion in the air anywhere.

"Yes, he's headed up to the balcony on the right with Dr. Michel, who's been recruited as the medical officer on his ship." Tali explained quietly.

Anderson glanced up to his left and saw the doctor clearly moving along the walkway to get a better view. "Right then, the hearing's already started and Udina's presenting the reports from the ground team at Eden Prime. Saren's been contacted as well. Now that you're here, we can let him see you, Tali, and present your evidence as well."

He led them up the stairs towards the platform, where Ambassador Udina, Commander Shepard, Kaidan, Ashley, and Wrex were already waiting.

"The geth attack is a matter of some concern. But there is nothing to indicate Saren was involved in any way." Councilor Tevos, the Asari representative said.

"The investigation by Citadel Security turned up no evidence to support your charge of treason," Councilor Sparatus, the turian representative on the Council, added.

"An eyewitness saw him kill Nihlus in cold blood!" Udina countered angrily.

"We've read the Eden Prime reports, Ambassador. The testimony of one traumatized dockworker is hardly compelling proof." Councilor Valern, the Salarian representative, disagreed.

"I resent these accusations. Nihlus was a fellow Spectre. And a friend."

Garrus glanced over at the large red projection of Saren beside the Council. There he was, the Council's top Spectre, and the most respected without a doubt. He glanced up at the balcony and saw Dr. Michel give him a nod. So the Chief now knew what Saren looked like.

"That just let you catch him off guard," Anderson accused.

"Captain Anderson," Saren greeted with ire in his voice. "You always seem to be involved when humanity makes false charges against me. And this must be your protÃ©gÃ©, Commander Shepard. The one who let the beacon get destroyed."

Velana narrowed her eyes, as she addressed the Spectre. "The mission to Eden Prime was top secret. The only way you could know about the beacon was if you were there!"

"With Nihlus gone, his files passed on to me. I read the Eden Prime report. I was unimpressed. But what can you expect from a human?" Saren insulted.

"Saren despises humanity. That's why he attacked Eden Prime!" Velana declared.

The turian Spectre looked down upon Shepard, as if she were no more than an insect compared to him. "Your species needs to learn its place, Shepard. You're not ready to join the Council. You're not even ready to join the Spectres!"

"He has no right to say that! That's not his decision!" Udina shouted.

"Shepard's admission into the Spectres is not the purpose of this meeting." Councilor Tevos chided Saren, though it sounded half-hearted.

"This meeting has no purpose. The humans are wasting your time, Councilor. And mine." Saren retorted.

"Funny you should mention that, Saren," Anderson said, with a rapidly growing smirk on his face. "Because, as it just so happens, we have here a quarian who has concrete evidence that you played a part in

the attack on Eden Prime."

Tali stepped forward at Captain Anderson's gesture, and she clearly saw the first sign of worry on Saren's face. Good. She wanted him to know that his attempts on her life had failed, and now it was time to suffer the consequences. Even knowing that he had a copy of the recording on his omni-tool, Captain Anderson allowed her to play the original, as it would have a greater impact on Saren coming from her.

"_Eden Prime was a major victory. The beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the conduit."_

"_And one step closer, to the return of the reapers."_

By now, even Ambassador Udina was smirking. Anderson turned towards Saren, and relished the sight of the smug arrogance sliding right off the turian's face. "Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but that voice sounded very familiar. Did you recognize it too, Saren?"

For a moment, Saren was silent, as even the Councilors turned to look at Saren in shock. Then the Spectre released a furious snarl and instantly cut off communications.

"Thatâ€| was oh so satisfying." Garrus said.

"It did feel pretty good, getting back at that stupid bosh'tet for trying to have me killed." Tali admitted.

"You wanted proof? There it is." Udina said.

Sparatus sighed in disappointment and shook his head. "Though it saddens me to say it, this evidence is irrefutable, ambassador. Saren will be stripped of his Spectre status and all efforts will be made to bring him in to answer for his crimes."

"I recognize the other voice, the one speaking with Saren. Matriarch Benezia." Tevos informed Sparatus.

"Who's she?" Velana inquired.

"Matriarchs are powerful asari who have entered the final stages of their lives. Revered for their wisdom and experience, they serve as guides and mentors to my people." Tevos explained. "Matriarch Benezia is a powerful biotic, and she had many followers. She will make a formidable ally for Saren."

"I'm more interested in the reapers," Valern stated. "What do you know about them?"

"Only what Tali managed to extract from the geth's memory core, where she obtained those audio files." Anderson replied. "The reapers were an ancient race of machines that wiped out the protheans. Then they vanished."

"The geth believe the reapers are gods. And Saren is the prophet for their return." Tali clarified.

Anderson nodded with Tali's statement. "We believe the Conduit is the key to bringing them back. Saren's searching for it. That's why he

attacked Eden Prime."

"Do we even know what this Conduit is?" Valern skeptically.

"Saren thinks it can bring back the reapers. That's bad enough." Velana reasoned.

"Listen to what you're saying. Saren wants to bring back the machines that wiped out all life in the galaxy? Impossible. It has to be." Sparatus asserted. "Where did the reapers go? Why did they vanish? How come we've found no trace of their existence? If they were real we'd have found something!"

Velana shook her head in frustration. "You doubted us about Saren, and you were wrong. Don't make the same mistake again."

"This is different." Tevos argued. "You proved Saren betrayed the Council. We all agree he's using the geth to search for the Conduit, but we really don't know why."

"The reapers are obviously just a myth, Commander. A convenient lie to cover Saren's true purpose. A legend he is using to bend the geth to his will." Valern concluded.

"The reapers wiped out all galactic civilization 50,000 years ago. If Saren finds the Conduit, it will happen again!" Velana declared.

Sparatus shook his head in denial. "Saren is a rogue agent on the run for his life. He no longer has the rights or resources of a Spectre. The Council has stripped him of his position."

"That is not good enough! You know he's hiding somewhere in the Traverse. Send your fleets in!" Udina demanded.

"A fleet cannot track down one man." Valern said.

Udina was not so keen on letting the matter go yet. "A Citadel fleet could secure the entire region. Keep the geth from attacking anymore of our colonies."

"Or it could trigger a war with the Terminus Systems." Sparatus countered. "We won't be dragged into a galactic confrontation over a few dozen human colonies!"

"Every time humanity asks for help, you ignore us!" Velana said angrily.

"Shepard's right," Udina said. "I'm sick of this Council and its anti-human bullâ€"

"Ambassador!" Tevos cut Udina off. "There is another solution. A way to stop Saren that does not require fleets or armies."

"No!" Sparatus exclaimed, already knowing where Tevos was going with this. "It's too soon. Humanity is not ready for the responsibilities that come with joining the Spectres."

"You don't have to send a fleet into the Traverse, and the Ambassador gets his human Spectre. Everybody's happy." Velana

rationalized.

Tevos and Valern looked over at Sparatus, both of them having already come to the conclusion that this was the best option. After a few moments, Sparatus signaled his agreement, albeit reluctantly. All three councilors tapped the consoles in front of them, to register a new Spectre.

"Commander Shepard â€“ step forward." Tevos said.

Velana glanced at Captain Anderson, who nodded encouragingly. She stepped forward, and clasped her wrists behind her back, standing at attention before the council. She idly noticed that many people had appeared on the balconies on either side of the Council chambers, watching this momentous occasion.

"It is the decision of the Council that you be granted all the powers and privileges of the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance branch of the Citadel." Tevos began.

"Spectres are not trained, but chosen. Individuals forged in the fires of service and battle; those whose actions elevate them above the rank and file." Valern described.

"Spectres are an ideal, a symbol. The embodiment of courage, determination, and self-reliance. They are the right hand of the Council, instruments of our will." Tevos continued.

"Spectres bear a great burden. They are the protectors of galactic peace, both our first and last line of defense. The safety of the galaxy is theirs to uphold." Sparatus concluded, surprisingly without any prejudice in his voice.

"You are the first human Spectre, Commander. This is a great accomplishment for you and your entire species." Tevos congratulated.

"I'm honored, Councilor." Velana said graciously.

"We're sending you into the Traverse after Saren. He's a fugitive from justice, so you are authorized to use any means necessary to apprehend or eliminate him." Valern informed the Commander.

"Any idea where to start looking?" Velana asked?

"We will forward any relevant files to Captain Anderson." Sparatus replied.

"This meeting of the Council is adjourned." Tevos announced, now that all relevant business had concluded. The three councilors left the chamber, as did most of the people lining the sides, leaving only the group at the stand.

"Congratulations, Commander." Anderson said, shaking Velana's hand firmly.

"We've got a lot of work to do, Shepard." Udina stated. "You're going to need a ship, a crew, suppliesâ€¦ Anderson, come with me. I'll need your help to set all this up." The two of them quickly left, leaving Velana alone with just the group around her.

"I'd have thought the Ambassador would be a little more grateful." Ashley said.

Velana shrugged. "Until I've caught Saren, I haven't done anything. Come on."

* * *

><p>When Velana stepped off the elevator at the docking bay, she was surprised to see the Master Chief already there, along with Tali, Garrus, Dr. Michel, and Captain Anderson. "Good to see you again, Chief."</p>

"Likewise, ma'am." John said with a crisp salute. "I understand congratulations are in order. Now, you have everything you need to track Saren down."

"On that note Shepard, the Master Chief has agreed to aid you in the hunt for Saren. I figure having both of your ships moving through the Traverse will help speed up the search." Anderson said.

Velana blinked, not quite sure she'd heard the Captain correctly. "Pardon me sir, but both of our ships? I don't have a ship of my own."

"Yes, you do. I'm stepping down as commanding officer of the Normandy. The ship is yours now." Anderson said. "She's quick and quiet, and you know the crew. Perfect ship for a Spectre. Treat her well, Commander."

"I'll take good care of her, sir." Velana promised.

"I know you will, Commander." Anderson replied. "Now then, Saren's gone. While we were still talking with the Council, he's probably managed to get a good lead on us. But, we know what he's after: the Conduit. He's got his geth scouring the Traverse looking for clues. We've had reports from the Feros system shortly before our colony there dropped out of contact. There's also been sightings around Noveria. Find out what Saren was up to on Feros and Noveria. Maybe you can figure out where the Conduit is before he does."

"Anything else?" Velana asked.

"There is one more lead. Matriarch Benezia, the other voice on that recording? She has a daughter, a scientist who specializes in the protheans. I'm not sure if she's involved, but it might be a good idea to try and find her. See what she knows. Her name's Liara. Dr. Liara T'Soni. Based on the reports we've received, she was last seen exploring an archeological dig on one of the uncharted worlds in the Artemis Tau Cluster."

Velana nodded and turned towards the Chief. "Chief, I'll head for the Artemis Tau Cluster, and look for this Dr. T'Soni."

John nodded, just as the pelican arrived, docking opposite the Normandy. "I have no knowledge of either of the two remaining planets, but as Captain Anderson said there's an Alliance colony on Feros, I'll start my search there."

"We'll meet up on Noveria and compare our findings." Velana stated, feeling eager now that they had a plan. Things were starting to come together rather well. "Do you need the coordinates for Feros, Chief?"

John brought up his omni-tool. "Cortana?"

"We've got it, Chief." She confirmed. "Noveria's coordinates are also stored in the database, along with hundreds of other locations."

"We'll see you on Noveria, Commander." John climbed into the back of the pelican, along with Tali and Dr. Michel. However, he was surprised when Garrus climbed in as well. "Garrus?"

Garrus sat down beside Dr. Michel, opposite from the Chief who was sitting beside Tali. "I did say I'd be sticking around until the situation with Saren was over. And from what I've seen, this is just the beginning."

John accepted that. Garrus was highly skilled from what he'd seen so far. "Cortana, get us back to the _Shadow_, and plot a course for Feros."

"Already on it, Chief. Let's go find Saren."

The pelican took off from the Citadel and headed up towards the _Moonlight Shadow._ It was time to take a Spectre down.

* * *

><p>Oh my god, finally. I hate this chapter. Chapters like this are a necessary evil, to move the story forward. The next chapter to come will be Feros, and that will be both easier and more enjoyable for me to write.</p>

If there's something you don't like about this chapter, please don't flame. I'd rather you explained calmly and offered constructive criticism. As you've seen, I do go back and edit chapters based on things I hear from my readers.

As always, read and review, and alert me to any spelling or grammar mistakes found in the chapter. I will correct them immediately.

5. Chapter 5

Disclaimer: I don't own anything concerning Halo or Mass Effect in any way.

Warning: Extra long author's note coming up in response to a couple of reviews. The only thing important for this chapter is at the end of the A/N, just before the actual start of the chapter, so unless you want to read about the arguments I'll be making over lore, you can skip all of this.

Now then, to the anonymous reviewer named "Drake", who said that the Chief shouldn't have to salute officers not directly in his chain of command, like Captain Anderson or Commander Shepard, you're technically wrong. I went looking up military protocols and

regulations and came upon this:

"Army Regulation 600-25 Salutes, Honors, and Visits of Courtesy, Chapter 1-5 Paragraph e: It is customary to salute officers of friendly foreign nations when recognized as such."

There's a bit more to it, but essentially, the Master Chief is following military doctrine by saluting superior officers, even if they can't directly give him orders. Or at least, I've adapted the regulation for the UNSC, so that the Alliance could be considered a friendly foreign nation.

Now, I'm not in the military, and I haven't served, so I might be wrong here. But I'm pretty sure this is just a sign of respect, and a way to better relations with those foreign nations. If anyone with a military background sees this and can confirm or correct my statement, I'd be most appreciative.

Now then to reviewer "hornet07" who actually called my lore research into question, something from which I take great offense, I will now answer and reply to your claims that I have no idea what I'm doing. Your claims will be in *italics*.

1) "A "standard" UNSC destroyer is not 3km. That's a carrier. Perhaps I interpreted it wrongly, but it sounded like you said a destroyer was 3km and a carrier was 5km."

1a) The way I intended to word that statement was not the way I actually worded it in the story, which caused confusion like this. My bad. First, what I said was, "destroyer class ship awaiting them, though based on its size, it could have been classed as a carrier". A "standard" UNSC destroyer class was the only variant to have two Magnetic Accelerator Cannons, rather than the standard one, which is why it was initially acknowledged as a destroyer class ship. It has more than one MAC.

The next statement was not written correctly, which I have gone back and fixed. The modified statement by Cortana now reads, "Right. Now normally, a ship this size would most closely be identified as a carrier. However, the Moonlight Shadow is 5km long, rather than a carrier's standard 3km."

I know that in actuality, the ship closest in size to the 5km Moonlight Shadow would be the UNSC Infinity, an Infinity-class warship, which is 5,694.2 meters in length. However, the first appearance of that ship was in Halo 4, and the events of that game did not happen in this story, which means Cortana was not aware of its existence.

Keep in mind though, that the Moonlight Shadow is ****not**** a "standard" UNSC ship and shouldn't be forced to adhere to normal ship classifications.

2) "If the Chief's shields were improved upon hundreds of times, 5% is too much considering the comparatively low power mass effect weapons."

2a) This is partly my fault, and I have gone back to re-word the explanation from the first chapter. This is the new description: "Factoring in the actual strength of your new shields, the fact that

they have three layers, and a vastly shorter recharge time, I'd have to say that overall, your new shields are about a hundred times better than that of the MJOLNIR Mark VI."

Stronger was the wrong word. Better is more appropriate. Their improvement is based upon all the factors, not just their actual durability. Also, you seem to be under the misconception that Mass Accelerator weapons are weak. This is incorrect. They are in fact very deadly.

"A mass accelerator propels a solid metal slug using precisely-controlled electromagnetic attraction and repulsion. The slug is designed to squash or shatter on impact, increasing the energy it transfers to the target. If this were not the case, it would simply punch a hole right through, doing minimal damage.

A slug lightened by a mass effect field can be accelerated to greater speeds, permitting projectile velocities that were previously unattainable. If accelerated to a high enough velocity, a simple paint chip can impact with the same destructive force as a nuclear weapon. However, mass accelerators produce recoil equal to their impact energy. This is mitigated somewhat by the mass effect fields that rounds are suspended within, but weapon recoil is still the prime limiting factor on slug velocity."

The projectiles fired from Mass Effect-verse weapons are metal shavings, probably no bigger than grains of sand. They are simply accelerated to a velocity where they become deadly. How fast do you think a grain of sand would have to be accelerated, before it was deadly enough to strip away kinetic barriers or even tear through armor?

Do I think they're more deadly than the Chief's new and improved gauss UNSC arsenal or the hard light weapons? No. But that doesn't mean they're not highly effective. Considering their stopping power, and they can sometimes strip away kinetic barriers in-game like tissue paper, losing only 5% of the first layer of his shields is remarkable.

3) "Spartan reflexes, before being upgraded again with the nanites and new armor, are far beyond any human can attain. The fact that the Chief couldn't do more than keep up with the kill count and actually being LATE in taking out enemies before Shepard's team is just not possible."

3a) First, the nanites do not actually improve strength, speed, reaction times, etc. They simply corrected a side-effect of the SPARTAN augmentation procedures, bolster the Chief's immune system, and temporarily halt his aging, having already reversed it somewhat.

Second, if you want to read a story where the Chief blitzes through everything in his path and takes care of everything alone without any challenges, difficulties, or worries then go find another story to read, because this is not that story. Even with the Chief's base augmentations and his old MJONIR suit, Covenant sangheili, or elites, were able to match him in strength, speed, and reactions, and this was natural for them. The jiralhanae, or brutes, were able to overpower Spartan IIs in strength and catch up to running Spartan IIs, again all natural to their race.

Their augmentations don't make them gods, just far better than regular humans. When you start factoring in alien races, the gap starts closing. Now the point you are disputing, I believe, is where Wrex managed to body tackle a mercenary into the wall and blast him point-blank with the shotgun before the Chief could finish the man himself.

If you read that section in Chora's Den closely, you'd see that the Chief, Tali, and Garrus did not advance along their side of the bar very far, and kept low behind cover, taking things cautiously for the most part. On the other side, with an angry Wrex eager to get to his target, do you really think Shepard's group would have taken it cautiously? Hell no. Wrex would have been rushing through those mercs like a rampaging rhino. For him to get to the last enemy first is not unfeasible.

4) Gauss rounds are pretty damn fast, not as fast as ME weapons but still very fast. Combined with their massively more heavy rounds that are also extremely dense, well...let's just say a geth destroyer or whatever that was would certainly have received immense damage. "No visible damage"...I call huge steaming pile of bullshit._

4) In the playthrough I'm using to help write this story, the geth I saw in-game, and thus mentioned, was not a Geth destroyer. It was a Geth Prime, the deadliest mobile platform available to the Geth. Now obviously, my readers don't know this because the Chief does not know that's what this enemy was called, so I couldn't call it a Geth Prime directly.

"Larger and more powerful than any other geth infantry platform, Primes are equipped with heavy armor and shields, specialized abilities, and a variety of deadly weapons. Standing twelve feet high, and boasting the deadliest arsenal of any geth infantry, a Geth Prime is a terrifying opponent. Instantly recognizable by their white armor and huge stature, Primes carry a pulse rifle, which can also launch rockets, have six levels of shielding and are incredibly resilient. They also boost nearby geth combat stats, and it is this ability that sets them apart from the Geth Juggernaut. Primes have no major weaknesses and are resistant to biotic and tech talents. They are the largest bi-pedal geth unit, towering over the second largest unit, the Geth Juggernaut."

With a larger frame, comes bulkier, more durable armored plating, and more power for kinetic barriers. The gauss weapons, while incredibly powerful, are not going to drop a Prime with a "burst to the head". Dropping the more powerful kinetic barriers, sure. That's believable. But that means the barrier took the brunt of the shot, and left the armored head beneath unscathed. Just as I said. No. Visible. Damage. With all that being said, there was no need to be rude by calling it a steaming pile of bullshit. That's no longer constructive criticism. That's pretty much flaming.

5) If a journey with old UNSC slipspace tech would take close to one month while the upgraded forerunner drive would only take 4 days, then that means that the upgrades are just 7 times faster. This translates to a speed of roughly 18 light years per day, instead of the 2371 it was supposed to attain. This is no trivial error. It is rather colossal._

5a) This error was entirely my fault. I have gone back and done the calculations properly, and changed the comparison. After crunching the numbers, I came up with a travel time of almost seven years to reach the Citadel using the old Shaw-Fujikawa translight engines. That's still no reason to have such a poor attitude. You could have phrased that more respectfully, and you know it.

6) "_First, description of reactions is purely bland. No convincing amazement or shock. Just a momentary "wow" before going back to business as usual. You would think the Chief's story, combined with his tech and overall appearance would be more attention-grabbing than the next thing on the menu in the mess hall. That's the way it looks to me. Rushed, half-assed, CLEARLY forced interactions that just don't feel right. Don't even get me started on just glossing over big info like Halos, Flood in passing. Just a single paragraph and nothing else; information Chief would not have just handed over by the way."_

6a) That's a personal problem, on your side. If my writing style seems boring or bland to you, then continuing to read my story is your fault. Pointing out that **you **have a problem with my writing style, and that you hate it, is not constructive. It's pretty much flaming me for the sake of being an ass. You're also not an author yourself. You have no written stories, just a list of favorite stories and authors. It's pretty pathetic to flame my writing style without even having one of your own.

I'm not saying I'm the best author. I'm not saying I'm a fantastic, great, or even skillful writer. I actually consider myself rather average at best. I know my skill with descriptions could be better, but I also find it a chore to read through stories that bog the reader down with too much description, which is why I don't write in such a manner.

As for the information, you have to understand, that information is kept secret and confidential because in the wrong hands, it could be detrimental to the people involved, like Dr. Halsey, Mendez, Ackerson, etc. If people found out all the things they did, they would suffer a lot of consequences. In fact, Dr. Halsey herself was recently punished for the things she did in creating the SPARTAN IIIs.

However, no one in this universe can use this information in such a manner. Telling them about the augmentation procedures and the history of the SPARTAN IIIs does not, in any way, shape, or form, tell them how it was done or how to recreate the process. They were not given blueprints or step-by-step instructions on how to create the MJOLNIR armor. Revealing details about the flood does nothing for them, because they don't exist in this universe, and they're gone in the Chief's original universe. The halo rings also don't exist in this universe. Learning about them does nothing for the people here, because they were never created here, they weren't told how to recreate them, not that the Chief himself knew. {~Credit to user "Mao Hisakawa" for pointing out to me that the remaining rings Chief didn't see are not "gone", but rather, "missing", which is a key distinction.}

I believe information is kept classified to protect people from repercussions and to prevent others from recreating or copying technology or experimental procedures. There is literally nothing

_that Captain Anderson, Shepard, Ashley, and Kaidan could do with this information that could affect anyone in the UNSC or the Chief's home universe. They were also not given enough information to do anything with it themselves, like make their own SPARTANS, power armor, or weapons with hard light, plasma, or gauss technology.

7) _"Secondly, and by far the worst thing, Chief has just been downgraded to errand boy ME style. This is not how you do a crossover. You don't force a character from another universe (Chief) to conform to the standards of his new home. It completely destroys the character. Chief was just a pathetic squad mate of Shepard's first. Now he has "companions". This is not Master Chief. He works alone, like the super soldier he is. That you lump him in with common soldiers like that, no matter how skilled, and have him immediately act like a dog at Anderson and Shepard's leashes without a single independent thought is sickening. It's like Captain America taking orders from a corporal and being forced to lead a squad of mercenaries that are completely human and not superhuman."_-

7a) First of all, at the time the Chief was working with Shepard on Eden Prime, he still believed she was part of the UNSC, and thus a commanding officer. Complaining about him following orders from a superior officer is illogical. And second, do you even know _anything_ about the Master Chief? Have you read the books _at all?_ It's not like the Master Chief to have companions? Now I'm positive that everything you know about him is based on the games and _**only **_the games. Given the choice, John _prefers_ fighting in a team or squad, rather than on his own.

The Chief was one of 75 children screened and selected for the SPARTAN II program. After the augmentation procedures, only 33 SPARTAN IIs were fit for combat. The rest had either died, or were too horribly disfigured to be put into combat. Several of them were still able to use their sharp minds in ONI, the Office of Naval Intelligence.

From that group of 33, John frequently led a team of SPARTANS known as Blue Team, which often included SPARTANS: James-005, Samuel-034, William-043, Kurt-051, Frederick-104, Linda-058, Kelly-087, and Grace-093. Not all at once, but at least three of the above listed SPARTANS fought beside him as part of Blue team each time they were deployed.

And you also don't think it's like the Chief to take orders from superior officers, even when not directly in his line of command. I can _sort of _see why this bothers you, only because we're talking about Captain Anderson and Shepard _specifically_. Keep in mind however, that the Chief is still unfamiliar with this universe, and based only on the knowledge he's acquired so far, he knows that a rogue spec ops turian has an army of AI soldiers under his command, and seems to be trying to bring back a race of sentient machines that once wiped out all life in the galaxy.

He doesn't _have_ to follow Captain Anderson's orders to help find Saren, but to ignore a threat to the galaxy like this goes against the Chief's character more than actually helping out Shepard would.

And again, you wouldn't have gotten this from just the games, but while the Chief may be a _team_ leader, he _almost_ always acts under

orders. In fact, he's only ever disobeyed direct protocol twice, and one of those was in Halo 4, which never happened in this story. So, he could hardly be called independent. Everything else he's ever done has been under someone else's orders or a mission he'd been assigned, even when leading a team. Here are some examples:

â€œ In July 2552, the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV began when the Covenant landed on the planet and took over one of the planet's major population centers, CÃ©te d'Azur. John and his fellow SPARTANS were **ordered** by Captain Keyes to go down and find out why the Covenant were so interested in the city. He led his team groundside to accomplish his mission, but this was all because he and the other SPARTANS had been ordered to deploy. Oh and look, John was fighting with companions during this mission! But that's totally not like him, right?

â€œ Let's progress to the beginning of Halo, the first game. It starts with the Chief in cryosleep aboard the Pillar of Autumn. The only reason he was there at all, was because ONI Section 3 **ordered** the execution of a secret plan to capture a Covenant ship using the Spartans. The ship would be taken to the Covenant home world in order to capture a Prophet, one of the Covenant religious leaders, and then use the Prophet as a bargaining chip to negotiate a truce.

Every remaining SPARTAN II, with the exceptions of Gray Team, Kurt-051, Jorge-052, Maria-062, the original Red Team (from Halo Wars), and Black Team, boarded a specially outfitted Halcyon-class light cruiser known as, you guessed it, the UNSC Pillar of Autumn, which was under the command of, correct again, Captain Jacob Keyes. You're two for two, good job. The Pillar of Autumn was moving out towards the edges of the system to make a Slipspace jump to begin the mission.

The plan, however, was interrupted when a massive Covenant fleet of 314 ships entered the Epsilon Eridani System, where Reach was located. Captain Keyes ordered the Pillar of Autumn back towards Reach, but The Chief convinced him to allow the Spartans to continue their mission by finding a damaged Covenant ship to capture and take to Covenant space.

Long story short, the battle was not going well, and all SPARTANS aboard the ship, with the exception of the Chief, Linda, and James, were deployed groundside to help push the Covenant back and protect the generators powering the Super MACs surrounding the planet. The Pillar of Autumn took massive damage and was forced to make a random jump away from any of Earth's colonies, leaving behind all SPARTANS on Reach, where they ended up at the Halo ring.

â€œ On Halo itself, when Captain Keyes was captured, the Chief didn't decide himself to go and rescue the captain. He was **ordered** to do so by the Commander of the ODST forces aboard the Autumn, Major Antonio Silva. After that, everything else he did was under Captain Keyes's orders until the captain was taken by the flood. And from that point on, orders or not, it doesn't take a commanding officer to realize that you've got to stop the ring from firing, destroy it, and get the hell off before it blows.

And keep in mind that during all this, until the very end when he was in the crashed Autumn, the Chief made frequent updates to Major

Silva through Cortana. So, even though the book never stated it directly, I am assuming much of what he did was, if not ordered, then at least given approval by the Major.

" After the destruction of the alpha ring, the Chief was stuck in a Longsword-class Interceptor, which had no slipspace capabilities. Technically, his ongoing mission to enter Covenant space and capture a prophet was still in effect, which he intended to follow through to the end. He then coordinated with several other survivors from the Halo ring, who had escaped in a pelican, including: Sergeant Johnson, ODST Corporal Locklear, Warrant Officer Shiela Polaski, who was the pelican pilot, and ONI Lieutenant Haverson.

Oh hey! More companions! And this time they're non-SPARTAN companions, just ordinary UNSC soldiers and personnel! What do you know, the Chief has **no** qualms about fighting with a team, or with regular soldiers.

This group successfully captured a Covenant flagship called the Ascendant Justice. While John wanted to continue his mission to capture the Covenant prophet, which superseded Haverson's authority, Haverson convinced him that getting back to Earth was a larger priority, which John agreed with and relinquished command to the lieutenant.

Because the Cole Protocol forbids them from taking a Covenant vessel to Earth directly, John managed to get their location set to Reach, because he wanted to see what became of his fellow SPARTANS. While on Reach, he finds several SPARTANS, Dr. Halsey, and Vice Admiral Danforth Whitcomb, who then gives John his orders for the remainder of this book all the way up to the point where his actions result in the destruction of a Covenant command-and-control center and refit-battle station, that was capable of supporting a fleet of over 500 capital ships.

It was capable of slipspace jumps, and would have been able to bring the entire fleet to Earth faster than the UNSC would be able to react and mount a defense, not that they could stop 500 capital ships. The station was destroyed, as well as all but 12 capital ships, which leads right into Halo 2.

Now, I could go on, but I think you see my point. I do my research, I know my lore, but I do make mistakes. I will humbly acknowledge and correct my mistakes when pointed out. However, I would like to request that no one else outright accuse me of anything unless you're absolutely sure you're right. Politely and respectfully pointing something out to me is fine, just nothing like what this asshole did. If you're unsure of anything or would like further clarification, just pm me or ask me in a review and I will do my best to answer your question or explain something more clearly for you.

Okay, with all of that out of the way, let's get to the actual story. Now this is, hopefully one of the few times or the only time, I will ask you guys to somewhat suspend your disbelief of the established lore in Mass Effect. I have been doing research into this matter, but the codex entries were too ambiguous for me to obtain a definitive answer.

The codex says, "Faster-than-light drives use element zero cores to reduce the mass of a ship, allowing higher rates of acceleration.

This effectively raises the speed of light within the mass effect field, allowing high speed travel with negligible relativistic time dilation effects. Starships still require conventional thrusters (chemical rockets, a commercial fusion torch, an economy ion engine, or a military antiproton drive) in addition to the FTL drive core. With only a core, a ship has no motive power."

What confused me was this statement: "****FTL****, an abbreviation of faster-than-light, is a method of traveling faster than the speed of light which does not involve the use of mass relays. Once a vessel makes a jump via a mass relay, conventional FTL can be used to move around the space surrounding it at reasonable speed."

Now, I don't know about you guys, but to me, this seems to imply that the use of a Mass Relay does not require an eezo drive core. That the drive core is only for moving FTL within a system or between local systems, and transit between relays is handled by the mass relay itself, once the pilot has provided the mass of the ship or ships it will be transporting and the destination. I may be wrong, but I'm going to interpret it that way in this story.

So that's why I am asking you to somewhat suspend any disbelief for this reasoning.

Oh and if Cortana's dialogue is in italics, she's speaking through something, like an intercom or the omni-tool. If her dialogue isn't in italics, she's speaking directly to someone, either in John's helmet, or through her avatar on the ship.

Anyways, without further adieu, let's get to chapter 5.

* * *

><p>"Tell me again why we're even attempting this."</p>

"The planet Feros is in the Theseus system, in the Attican Beta cluster. Using just the Shadow's slipspace drives, it would take us thirty-five days to arrive," Cortana stated. "On the other hand, if we utilize the mass relays ourselves, we can arrive in the Hercules system in the Attican Beta cluster within minutes, and then transit over to Theseus almost immediately with slipspace. It's the quickest and most efficient way to reach our destination."

"Actually, the relay in the Hercules system doesn't link up with the relay we're approaching now, Chief." Tali chimed in from her station on the bridge. "We'll have to jump between relays at least three times before we actually make it to the Attican Beta. The only way to get there is to head to the Exodus cluster relay first, then the Hades Gamma cluster, and then to the Attican Beta."

"Can the Moonlight Shadow even use a relay to travel?" John asked.

"Of course it can. Transit between relays is handled by the relays themselves, without any special equipment required by ships. They create virtually mass-free "corridors" of space-time between each other that can propel starships across enormous distances that would take months, or sometimes even years to traverse, even at FTL speeds." Cortana explained.

"The only thing we have to do is input the amount of mass to transit before moving into the approach corridor. After that, the relay activates, aligns itself with the corresponding relay, and propels the ship across space. Once you arrive, your ship will need FTL capabilities to reach a different system, but that's obviously no trouble for this ship," Tali added.

John nodded as he sat back down in the captain's chair and let Cortana and Tali handle the piloting and navigation of the ship. Based on the information about mass relays he'd read, the relay in the Hercules system could be reached by four separate primary relays, relays with only one 'partner' relay linked to them, in the Maroon Sea, Kepler Verge, Armstrong Nebula, and Sentry Omega cluster respectively. The only other way to the Attican Beta cluster was through the use of a single secondary relay, a relay that could link to any other relay over shorter distances, only a few hundred light years, in the Hades Gamma cluster.

"The Serpent Nebula relay is in range. Initiating transmission sequence now." Cortana announced, establishing a link with the mass relay, as she moved the Shadow further out from the Citadel and towards the massive construct. The relay itself consisted of two fifteen kilometer long, curved metal arms, surrounding a set of revolving, gyroscopic rings five-kilometers across, which contained a massive, blue-glowing core of element zero. "We are connected. Inputting transit mass and destination."

"The relay is hot," Cortana confirmed. "Acquiring approach vector now."

John watched in silence, as their ship came around from behind and started flying parallel to the relay. Almost instantly, a surge of the blue-glowing element zero shot out and enveloped the 5km ship, before propelling it across space to the linked relay. Just as he'd been told, the Moonlight Shadow arrived at the Antaeus system in the Hades Gamma cluster within seconds.

"Cortana, ship status?" John inquired.

"Engines are operational, slipspace drives are operational, cloaking field is still active, and the energy shield stands at 100%. All systems are online and functioning properly," Cortana informed her SPARTAN almost boredly. Honestly as if anything would have gone wrong with her at the helm.

"What's the drift from our destination target, Cortana?" Tali asked.

"Drift stands at 400K," Cortana replied in disappointment. She had expected to arrive exactly on target. It seemed she still had to get used to inputting calculations for mass relays. Thankfully, she had another chance to do so, as she started bringing the Moonlight Shadow around towards the in-system relay.

"That's actually amazing for your first time through a mass relay," Tali reluctantly admitted. Even some of the best quarian pilots from the flotilla couldn't break a minimum drift of 1300K. Cortana's processing and computing capabilities must have been phenomenal!

John stood up and left the bridge, and towards the armory, where Garrus was currently located, knowing Cortana and Tali could handle the ship's operations. Ever since their first meeting, Tali had decided to treat Cortana with a neutral indifference, trying to keep all their interactions as professional as possible. In fact, as often as possible, Tali tried to make sure she was addressing him rather than her. That was fine, and he could accept that. It was far better than outright hostility after all.

* * *

><p>Upon entering the armory, John found that Garrus had field stripped a forerunner Z-750 Binary Rifle, using diagrams Cortana had generously uploaded to his omni-tool, and was now reassembling the hard light sniper rifle. John had expected the process to be slow going, but Garrus seemed to be learning with each piece he correctly fit together.</p>

Finally, Garrus stood up and hefted the finished weapon appreciatively. "Fine piece of equipment here, Chief. It's lighter than other rifles I've handled, but the lack of a solid block of metal and a mass accelerator system would probably cut the weight significantly. How's the kickback on this thing?"

"Negligible," John answered, watching as Garrus handled the binary rifle like an expert marksman. The way he cradled it in his arms looked so natural and fluid, that even Linda, the best sniper among the SPARTAN IIs, would have been impressed. "However, recoil is not dependent on stopping power with this weapon. It may kick harder than you're used to from a sniper rifle."

Garrus nodded, taking in the Chief's advisement under consideration, before setting the sniper rifle back on the weapon rack. It was more than likely he'd get a chance to test out the weapon for himself once they reached Feros. "I want to thank you Chief, for bringing me onboard your ship as a member of your crew. I figured working with someone like you would be better than a life at C-Sec."

"What makes you say that?" John asked in curiosity. True, they were going to find and stop Saren and the geth, but they hadn't actually done anything yet.

"It's the freedom," Garrus responded. "At C-Sec, you're buried by rules, regulations, and miles of red tape. The damn bureaucrats are always on your back. That's why I quit. Here, it's just: protect civilians, destroy geth, and take down Saren. That's all I need to focus on."

They also needed to find the Conduit and stop the Reapers, but John assumed that Garrus's statement had also implied those details as well. "Just keep in mind that we don't endanger the lives of innocents in the line of duty if at all possible." John said seriously.

"Of course, Chief. That's a given," Garrus agreed.

"Are you sure you won't come to regret leaving C-Sec?" John asked. "Reasoning aside, your decision seemed rather impulsive."

Garrus nodded, acknowledging that perhaps he'd been a little rash.

"Well, that's sort of why I requested to join up with you. It's a chance for me to get off the Citadel, see how things are done outside of C-Sec. Either way, you won't need to worry about me, Chief. You're now my commanding officer, and I won't let you down."

John remained silent. What more needed to be said? If Garrus could get the job done, and he believed the turian could, then that's all there was to it.

"_We've reached the Hercules system in the Attican Beta, and are en route to the Theseus system. ETA is forty minutes,"_ Cortana announced over the intercom.

"I'll head back up to my station now, Chief. Just wanted to familiarize myself with the equipment." Garrus said, as he headed out of the armory and back up to the bridge, with John following him a moment later.

* * *

><p>While they were en route to the Theseus system, John had been reading codex entries, making sure he was well informed about as much as possible. Especially the geth. However, as he was searching through the library for files stored in his omni-tool, he was once again reminded that the entry on quarians was bare bones in comparison to the many other files, only detailing their history with the geth and the details on the pilgrimage that Tali had provided.</p>

Cortana had asked him twice already to have Tali help fill the entry up with relevant information. Her thirst for knowledge also left her frustrated with missing or incomplete information, which was why she had been so insistent on having him ask Tali to help complete the entry. Unlike Tali, Cortana had no ill will for the quarian aboard the ship. It was actually the exact opposite. Cortana easily recognized the vast intelligence and technical skills that Tali possessed, qualities she herself had in spades, and thus admired in others.

Deciding that it wouldn't hurt to ask Tali if she'd be willing to contribute some general knowledge on quarians for the sake of his codex, he had Cortana use the localized slipspace transportation system to bring him down to the engineering section of the ship, where Tali had come to inspect the engines more closely. She couldn't find out too much from the ops station on the bridge, after all.

"Tali, do you have a spare moment?" John asked.

Tali stood up from her crouched position in front of the slipspace drive, and turned around to face him. "Oh, sure Chief. I just finished my examination of the slipspace drive anyways. I still can't believe how amazing this ship is. I've never seen an engine like yours, or even anything similar to the Moonlight Shadow's slipspace drive. The amount of power you're able to draw out and utilize is astounding! I think I'm starting to understand why you humans have been so successful, if the Alliance has ships like this in their fleets."

"Actually, I'm not affiliated with the Systems Alliance. I'm

assisting Commander Shepard and Captain Anderson in the pursuit for Saren, but I don't fall under their direct command. And this ship is the only one of its kind," John corrected her.

"I see," Tali said. "Still, it's hard to believe that just one month ago I was patching a makeshift fuel line into a converted tug ship in the flotilla, and now I'm probably aboard the most advanced ship in Citadel Space, maybe even the galaxy. So, I have to thank you again for bringing me along. Traveling on a ship like this is a dream come true for me."

"You don't have to thank me for that, Tali," John replied.

"Oh, right, you said you needed a moment of my time for something. What can I do for you, Chief?" Tali asked.

John activated his omni-tool, and raised his left arm up to his chest, opening the quarian codex entry in the process. "I have very little knowledge on the quarian people as a whole, and was wondering if you'd be willing to provide some information. Or you could transfer over the codex entries in your omni-tool."

"Of course," Tali answered immediately. "Well, I don't have codex entries on my own race. There's no point. But I can tell you anything you want to know. It's the least I can do, after everything you've already done for me. What would you like to know?"

John had to take a moment to think about that. He could probably use an entry on one of the other races as a guideline, but if he wanted as much information as possible, he'd also have to acquire more quarian-specific details. "Let's start with ships, since you seem so fascinated by the _Shadow_."

"That comes with being a quarian," Tali commented. "The Migrant Fleet is the key to the survival of my people, and ships are our most valuable resource. Even with the largest fleet in the galaxy, we don't have anything as advanced as the Moonlight Shadow. Mostly we make do with cast-offs or second-hand equipment, and try to keep them running for as long as possible. In fact, some of the fleet's larger vessels date all the way back to our original flight from the geth, 300 years ago."

John nodded, his omni-tool automatically transcribing her words into the quarian codex file. Cortana would sort and organize it all on her own, once he'd gotten enough information to satisfy her. "Are the quarians really able to get good use out of ships three centuries old?"

"Well, they're constantly being repaired, modified and refitted. They're not pretty, but they work," Tali clarified. "More than anything, we've tried to make ourselves as independent as possible on the flotilla. We grow our own food aboard the liveships, mine and process our own fuel, but there are some things that can't be done without raw materials or certain technology. That's why pilgrimages are important."

John already knew enough about the pilgrimages, so he instead switched to the most obvious topic. "What can you tell me about the quarians as a whole?"

Tali sighed. "Our lives aren't easy. Resources are scarce, and we're constantly on the move. Every action we take must in some way contribute to the continuation of the Migrant Fleet. There are 17 million quarians in the flotilla, and each of us relies on the others for survival. The bonds among my people are strong, but unfortunately, we have had to surrender many of the freedoms and civil liberties many species take for granted."

"Such as?" John prompted.

"Well," Tali said, after a moment's consideration, "it's illegal for parents to have more than one child. If our population grows too much, it would strain our resources to their breaking point. Of course, we also can't allow our numbers to become too few. If our population is in decline, the rule against single births is temporarily repealed. In extreme cases of population decline, incentives are offered to encourage multiple births. Though, the conclave hasn't needed to take such extreme measures in nearly a century."

"And this conclave would be your form of government, correct?" John asked, noticing that Cortana had already organized the information about the ships in the Migrant Fleet, cutting out the dialogue and leaving only the pertinent facts in the codex file. The only reason she hadn't spoken up herself, was because she knew Tali would be a lot less forthcoming if it had been Cortana requesting the information.

"The conclave is our civilian branch of government," Tali corrected. "Each ship can elect a representative to serve on the conclave, and make decisions that affect the fleet as a whole. On matters that affect an individual ship however, the captain has the final say. This policy dates back to the original flight from the geth, where martial law was often the norm. Fortunately, most captains now have an elected council from their crew to give them advice and guidance.

And finally, there's the admiralty board, consisting of the five top ranking military officials. These five have the power to overrule any decision made by the conclave in case of an emergency, but to do so requires unanimous agreement among the admiralty, and they can only do this once. After that, the entire board must resign their posts."

"I suppose that's one way to prevent abuse of power," John acknowledged.

"It is a safeguard that's served us well," Tali agreed. "In nearly three centuries, the admiralty board has only overruled the conclave four times."

Before John could ask anything else, Cortana's voice chimed in through the ship's intercom

"Chief, Tali, we've just exited slipspace and are approaching Feros now. And knowing you, Chief, you'll want to drop by the armory before I bring you to the hangar."

"Well, looks like it's time to get to work," Tali said casually. "If you want to know anything else, feel free to ask. I think you're the

first person who's ever been this interested in quarians."

"I'll keep that in mind," John replied, as the two of them met up with Garrus on their way towards the armory.

* * *

><p>Garrus had already placed the binary rifle on his back, but was now holding up both the LMG and the Suppressor, unable to decide which to bring for the mission. Eventually, he decided against using the suppressor, opting for the gun with a larger ammo capacity, and grabbed five reload cartridges for the binary rifle, and two drums for the LMG. He took two plasma grenades and two fragmentation grenades, storing them in pouches on his belt beside the binary rifle ammunition.</p>

Tali immediately gravitated towards the Scattershot at the far end of the weapon rack. Despite having multiples of the forerunner shotgun, Tali had instantly picked the same gun she'd used in Chora's Den. John had to wonder if she'd somehow marked it as her personal gun. She also took one of the Boltshot pistols, attaching it to her right hip, five hard light clips for each weapon, and four of the plasma grenades, foregoing the fragmentation grenades entirely.

John himself attached the ARTEMIS sniper rifle and Suppressor rifle onto his back, while sliding the CAWS shotgun onto the back of his waist. Like Garrus, he grabbed two plasma grenades and two fragmentation grenades, along with enough ammo for three reloads for each weapon.

Once they were all ready, Cortana transported them down to the hangar bay, where they climbed into a pelican ready to bring them down to the planet's surface. As the dropship left the *Moonlight Shadow* and descended towards the planet, the three passengers were given their first glimpse of Feros. The atmosphere was fouled by large dust clouds that blocked all view of the planet's surface, and rising up through the clouds were tall, crumbling towers, the remains of an old prothean city.

"*Chief, I'm picking up several ship signatures coming from the planet,*" Cortana said through the speakers in John's omni-tool.

"Geth ships, no doubt. That means Saren's here or has already left," Tali surmised. "But what could he possibly want from Feros?"

"The ExoGeni Corporation placed a permanent colony on Feros five years ago, to thoroughly explore the prothean ruins," Garrus answered. "Maybe they found something Saren needed; something that could get him that much closer to finding the Conduit."

"Cortana, is there any sign of that massive ship Saren used on Eden Prime?" John asked.

"*Negative, Chief. If Saren was here, then he's likely gone by now. However, since there's still geth on the planet, it couldn't have been that long ago.*" Cortana replied.

John nodded, turning towards Garrus and Tali. "Captain Anderson informed me that the Alliance lost contact with this colony. That

would coincide with the geth presence and Saren's arrival. Once we arrive, we find out what happened to the colony and what Saren came looking for."

Both Garrus and Tali understood that there was an implied order to take out all geth in the process.

Cortana brought the pelican into the dock closest to the geth ship signatures, backing the rear of the pelican up to the docking hatch. John, Garrus, and Tali stepped out of the dropship, which departed back towards the Moonlight Shadow. Glancing to their right, John saw a human colonist waiting at the far end of the dock, presumably for them. Had communications already been reestablished with the Alliance, and the colony had been informed by Captain Anderson to expect his arrival?

The trio headed over to the man, whose eyes widened rapidly upon the sight of the Master Chief approaching. He actually spent several seconds simply staring up at the massive armored human in front of him, until he apparently winced in pain and refocused himself. "My name is David al Talaqani. We saw your dropship coming. Fai Dan wants to speak with you immediately."

"Who's Fai Dan?" John inquired.

"He's our leader. He wants your help to prepare for the geth. They're making another push," David responded nervously. "Please, up the stairs, past the freighter."

Suddenly, John's motion detector lit up with enemy targets in the vicinity. "Look out," he warned, pulling David out of the way as a geth rocket trooper popped up from behind a low stone wall and fired off an explosive projectile their way, which flew past them and exploded harmlessly at the other site of the dock. John, David, and Tali had taken cover behind a stone partition to the left, while Garrus was directly across from them, taking cover on the right.

Pulling out his Suppressor, John crouched down and peeked out around cover, putting a stream of hard light projectiles straight through the bright red chest plate of the rocket trooper before it could get off another shot. Directly around the corner, a pair of geth forced him back into cover with suppressing fire from their rifles, until one of them had their heads blown off by a shot from Garrus with the binary rifle, the rest of the body disintegrating into particles of glowing orange light.

Looking over at the turian, John noticed that he'd been forced back several steps from the unexpected recoil. That Garrus had still been able to make the shot at all, on his first try with the weapon, was definitely a testament to his skill as a sniper. Now that he knew what kind of recoil to expect from the rifle, Garrus was able to brace himself and destroy the remaining geth trooper, with only a hard jerk to his shoulder from the rifle.

Using his left hand, John waved Garrus forward, receiving a nod from the turian who quickly advanced and took cover behind another stone partition around the corner, drawing fire from several more geth who had been lying in wait. Keeping the frightened David behind the partition, John and Tali advanced right after Garrus, both of them

moving into cover behind nearby storage crates, to avoid the shots now being drawn towards them.

Raising the Suppressor, John emptied the remainder of his clip down the path into the body of a geth shock trooper, obliterating the AI soldier but taking a shot to the chest from a hidden sniper. Dropping back down into cover, John noticed that shot had depleted 15% of his shield.

"Garrus, take out that sniper," John ordered.

"With pleasure," Garrus replied, ejecting the spent cartridge from his binary rifle and inserting a fresh clip. Using the stone wall he was hiding behind to balance his rifle, Garrus ignored the other enemies shooting at their group, focusing on the sniper at the back, hiding behind a pillar. Through his rifle's scope, he idly noticed that Tali had blasted two geth troopers off of their feet with the ricocheting projectiles from her Scattershot. The sniper poked its bright, white optics around the pillar, and Garrus didn't hesitate to put a shot through its head.

With the sniper taken care of, Tali primed a plasma grenade in her free hand and tossed it into the remaining geth troopers, blowing them apart in a bright blue explosion. "Area is secure," she reported a moment later. John motioned David forward with his hand, waiting until the frightened colonist had moved up to a crate just behind Garrus.

John, Garrus, and Tali moved around the corner, only motioning David to follow once they'd made sure there were no enemies in the vicinity. With a civilian now under their protection, they had to prioritize his safety as well as their own. Advancing into the next room, which had a staircase leading up to the next floor, John's motion detector picked up three enemies, and he immediately took a hit to his shoulder from above, prompting him to roll to his right with the shot, and pivot left towards the enemy.

There, hanging on the wall, was a geth unlike the others. Its body seemed less rigid than all the other geth units he'd seen so far, which was proven a moment later when it leapt off the wall and through the air, latching onto a pillar where it attempted to fire off another shot at him. John ducked under the beam and shot it down in midair with a concentrated burst from his Suppressor, when the geth attempted another jump.

Tali destroyed another in mid-jump, landing all five of her Scattershot's glowing projectiles on the geth's body, watching the AI disappear into wisps of orange light, while Garrus peppered the pillar above the trio with his LMG. After confirming that the stairwell was clear of any more hostiles, the group escorted David up behind them, as they turned the corner and came upon the exit leading to the colony.

Directly in front of them were hastily erected barriers, comprising of scrap metal taken from the hull of a damaged freighter. Several of the colonists were waiting behind them, wielding low-grade weapons meant for security forces, rather than trained soldiers. The colonists lowered their weapons when they saw the group bringing back one of their own safely, and directed John towards the rear of the colony, where their leader would be waiting.

It appeared that the colonists were using a crashed modular freighter as an impromptu shelter, considering it already had barracks, a medbay, and a mess hall. Though John could understand why parts of the hull had needed to be stripped to create barriers around the perimeter, he couldn't understand why the large freighter crane had not been broken down for useful parts. What purpose could the colonists have for the crane?

Following the directions he was given, John entered through the opening in the freighter, passing through the halls, when he noticed a couple in the medbay. From what David had said, the geth had already attempted to attack the colony at least once, and John didn't know if they had enough supplies, like medi-gel, to treat everyone. Knowing that he had the means to resupply the Shadow's stock, he decided to ask these two if the colony needed more for themselves.

"Hello, offworlder," The woman lying on the cot greeted as soon as the trio entered. "I'm glad that we aren't totally forgotten by the rest of the galaxy."

"Calantha, please try to rest. You're not ready to speak," The man by her side said.

"But Hollis, they should knowâ€| unhâ€|" Calantha protested, only to wince in pain mid-sentence. "I mean, they are very important." Almost instantly, a look of relief came upon her face, almost euphoric in nature. "Yes, that's better."

"Do you need medical treatment? You seem to be in pain," John remarked.

"I amâ€| fine. I just need to try and think clearly," she said calmly. "It's just a lingering pain fromâ€| from the last attack. I'll be fine."

Garrus narrowed his eyes slightly. She seemed to be trying especially hard to pick and choose her words. He'd seen these sorts of sporadic speech patterns during C-Sec interrogations, from prisoners trying not to accidentally give away useful information. What was throwing him off however, were the spasms of pain she seemed to be experiencing at seemingly random intervals. Try as he might, Garrus couldn't find one injury or wound that could be causing them.

"I can't see any significant damage, but something is clearly causing her pain," Garrus finally stated.

"Please, she just needs rest," the man said, all but asking them to leave.

Nodding in acceptance, John left the medbay and exited out through the other side of the freighter, where he finally found the leader, Fai Dan, and a woman he assumed must have been part of the security force, from the armor she wore and the rifle she carried.

"Ah, you must be the soldier who rescued David. You have my thanks," Fai Dan said gratefully.

"How did you know I saved him?" John asked. "He never radioed his

survival in, and we only just arrived."

"I saw iâ€"

"â€saw you enter the perimeter of the colony from here," the woman beside Fai Dan interrupted, giving him a look of warning. Fai Dan briefly winced in pain and nodded, something Garrus noticed. "Yes, that's right. Thank you, Arcelia."

Garrus glanced over his shoulder back towards the way they came and frowned. This location had no line of sight to the entrance of the colony. There was no way these two could have seen them. Garrus was just about to raise this point, but a discrete hand signal from the Chief stopped him. He must have realized the same thing, and decided it was better to keep that little detail to themselves.

Fai Dan wrung his sweaty hands together nervously. "In any case, we're glad you're here. The geth have been attacking almost non-stop now, and everyone's a little on edge. We could use all the help we canâ€"

"Look out! We've got geth in the tower!" Arcelia warned, as the distinct and familiar warble of geth troopers came from the path just past the two of them.

"Protect the heart of the colony!" Fai Dan ordered to the other colonists, as they retreated closer to the giant crane, while John tossed a fragmentation grenade out, blowing apart two geth troopers in an explosion of shrapnel.

"I'll take point. Tali, Garrus, on my six. We're going to clear out that tower of geth and hopefully get some answers," John ordered once they had left the edge of the colony, and moved up another flight of stone stairs. Pulling out his CAWS, John unloaded two shots into a geth shock trooper coming down to meet them and pushed aside the destroyed body to clear room for Tali and Garrus.

"Call me paranoid, but something about those colonists seemedâ€ off to me," Garrus said, as they steadily ascended the staircase.

"No, my instincts are telling me the same thing," John replied. "They could just be unused to real combat, and aren't handling it too well mentally."

"I don't want to die, please don't let me die!"

A colonist at the top of the stairs was riddled with shots from geth just past the next doorway, and collapsed on the ground, dead. Pressing his back against the wall on the right, John spotted two targets on his motion sensor. He turned and blasted the glowing optics off one of the geth, while a second was destroyed by Garrus, who had emptied the remainder of his LMG's drum around the doorway.

He heard the clicking sound of Garrus reloading his weapon, as he and Tali advanced up a smaller set of stairs, coming upon the top of the tower. The room itself was curved, and he spotted at least seven geth in the area waiting for them, including another sniper.

He primed and tossed out his remaining frag grenade, as he and Tali

dropped down behind a low stone wall, setting the CAWS back onto his waist. "Cortana, replace the ARTEMIS with the fuel rod cannon."

The sniper rifle on his back was enveloped in light, returning to the _Shadow's_ armory, while the golden-brown Covenant mortar weapon appeared in his hands a moment later. Leaning the heavy weapon against the top of the stone wall, John fired an arcing green projectile into the upper walkway, blowing the hidden geth sniper apart. Turning the weapon, John fired three more of the ballistic, incendiary gel projectiles in a parabolic arc over the debris in the area, which detonated behind the geth, taking out the juggernaut and three rocket troopers.

Two more geth troopers were dropped down from above, but Tali took down both with ricochetting projectiles. She glanced up through the opening above them and saw a geth dropship, which looked like an oversized hornet without wings, now pulling away from the tower, having delivered its load of geth. "Cortana!"

"I've got it, Tali. Launching hard light torpedo now." Cortana waited for the geth dropship to reach a safe distance from the tower, before firing. John, Garrus, and Tali watched as a glowing orange object descended rapidly through Feros's atmosphere, before it slammed into the geth dropship, puncturing straight through the hull. Once inside, the torpedo fragmented and shattered apart, taking out the engines and drive core, resulting in a chain of explosions that destroyed the ship from the inside out.

Despite the amount of distance Cortana had allowed the ship to reach, the resulting shockwave still shook the tower, and knocked Garrus and Tali off of their feet, while John managed to steady himself against the nearby wall.

"Well, I think we can safely say, all hostiles neutralized." Tali joked, as she pulled herself up with help from John.

"For now," Garrus remarked. "Still, we should update Fai Dan on the situation before we move on to wherever the geth are bunkered. He's the closest thing left to proper channels in this colony."

John concurred with Garrus's assessment, and the team made its way back down the tower to report in their success.

* * *

><p>"The tower's secure, thanks to youâ€| umâ€| "<p>

"Master Chief Petty Officer, you can just call me Chief," John said, cutting off Fai Dan. "And I'm just glad your colony is secure."

"I appreciate your concern, and your efforts against the geth, Chief." Fai Dan replied.

"They may have been slowed, but they'll be back. They always come back," Arcelia added in.

"Why do they keep coming back? What are the geth actually here for?" Garrus asked.

"We don't know what they're after. They came, they attacked us."

"That's all we know," Fai Dan retorted rather shortly. "Their main base is at the ExoGeni headquarters, a good place to start looking if you want answers."

"How do we get there?" John asked.

"Take the elevator you passed by up to the skyway. It leads directly to ExoGeni headquarters. You can't miss it." Arcelia informed him.

"Of course, there's an army of geth between here and there," Fai Dan added in.

John nodded in thanks for the directions and the warning. "Don't worry. We're prepared to handle them."

"Good. If you're going to take care of the geth, then maybe I can get this colony operational again in the meantime." Fai Dan remarked.

John raised an eyebrow beneath his helmet. "I was under the impression that only your communications were down. What else needs to be done before this colony is operational?"

"We need those geth destroyed," Arcelia answered quickly and forcefully, trying to stress the priority of the task.

Fai Dan glanced at her briefly, before nodding in agreement a moment later. "Arcelia is right. There are still geth in the lower tunnels, but we also have more mundane problems like food, water, and power. Personally, I've not been informed about where we stand on those matters. If you're willing to help, you could get more information from the colonists assigned to try and solve those problems."

"But you would know about the geth in the tunnels, right? What can you tell me about them?" John asked.

"I know a little," Fai Dan replied. "I can't tell you how many there are, but I know they're guarding a transmitter down there. That transmitter disrupts our interstellar communications, and prevents us from sending messages out. I'm surprised you even knew to come, but now that you're here, I don't think calling for help is as big of a priority anymore."

John remained silent, taking that into consideration. It would still be better to destroy that transmitter as soon as possible, and rout the geth from a location that close to the colony. He obtained the names and locations of the colonists looking for solutions to the other problems, and headed away from Fai Dan and Arcelia before speaking to Garrus and Tali. "We should take care of the geth in the tunnels before we move on to the ExoGeni headquarters. If we don't, the colony will come under attack once we're gone."

"Maybe we should help them with the other problems too," Tali suggested, as the sight of these people struggling with their colony, while also having to worry about the geth, reminded her too much of her own race. "At the very least, it wouldn't hurt to hear them out, and find out what they need, right?"

John figured they were pressed for time if Saren had already come and

gone, but agreed that it wouldn't hurt to at least get some more information before making a decision either way. He headed back into the freighter and came upon Davin Reynolds, the colonist assigned to sort out the food shortage. "You're the one who repelled the last wave of geth, right?"

"I am," John confirmed. "What are you doing to remedy the depleting rations?"

"Ideally, I'd like to supplement the rations with varren meat. If you can take down the geth transmitter, we'll be able to send messages to ExoGeni and have them deliver more shipments of rations. It's their job to provide us with supplies." Davin explained. "Unfortunately, it's too dangerous a task for us to handle. The alpha varrenâ€"he's huge, and he's mad, maybe even rabid. Totally uncontrollable. We can't go hunting for other varren until he's taken been taken care of. Just the other day he killed two colonists on his own. That was when we stopped trying."

"Where would this mad varren be located?" John asked neutrally. He still hadn't decided whether or not to get involved past the geth situation, but if he did, taking down one creature wouldn't pose any trouble.

"Down in the old garage. You can get there from a side passage in the lower tunnels," Davin responded.

"Convenient," Garrus muttered. "We could take care of both problems at once, Chief."

John could see the reasoning behind that, and agreed that they could also take care of this rabid varren while clearing out the geth. Once that transmitter was down, they could call in more supplies, getting them one step closer to fully operational. "I'll take care of it."

"Glad to hear it," Davin said in relief.

Exiting out the other side of the freighter, John found May O'Connell right where Fai Dan had told him she'd be, performing routine maintenance on the colony's main generator taken from the freighter. "Ms. O'Connell?"

May stood up and clapped slid her hands down the front of her overalls, partially ridding them of dirt and grease, though she now had two black smudges running down her sides. "Nice work with those geth. It's a good thing you showed up."

"I was informed that you're in charge of the colony's maintenance. What seems to be the problem with the generator?" John inquired.

"Missing power cells. Everything else has been repaired, and will be running smoothly once I get those." May stated.

"What sort of power cells?" Tali asked interestedly.

"RT-403s," May responded.

"Ohâ€|" Tali sighed. That model went out of production at least three

years ago. It would be almost impossible to find someone selling them now. Not even ships in the quarian flotilla used RT-403 power cells. "But, where would you even get outdated parts like those?"

"Their last year of production, the 403s were adapted to run M29 Grizzlies, until they were replaced by Makos," said May. "If you can get to the old garage, you'll find several of the broken down relics, barely worth their weight in scrap metal now. If you search through the remains of those grizzlies, and get lucky enough to find a useable set of power cells, bring 'em back and I'll put them to good use."

"That's where the alpha varren is supposed to be," Tali reminded the Chief.

"I can't promise I'll be able to find a usable set, but I'll at least take a look through the vehicles first," John said, as he headed over to the colonist working on the water shortage, Macha Doyle.

"I'm sorry, but I can't stop to talk. I have to deal with this water shortage," Macha said, without even turning around, having heard the approaching footsteps.

"What happened to your water supply?" John asked.

"The water mains were shut down. The utilities building was one of the first to fall under geth control. What little we had left is gone now, and unless those mains get reactivated, we'll all die of thirst before the geth can kill us," Macha ranted without any real heat in her voice. She simply sounded defeated.

John frowned. It didn't seem like the geth to try and wait out their enemy by letting them die of thirst. "Where exactly is the utilities building?"

"Just below the colony, actually, connected to the lower tunnels." Macha said.

"Lower tunnels again, Chief. I knew you were lucky, but this is unbelievable," Cortana quipped inside his helmet.

John said nothing, but was also surprised that he wouldn't have to go too far out of his way to get the colony back up and running again. They could actually accomplish everything in one trip, before setting out for ExoGeni's headquarters. "Let's get going. We have a lot to do."

* * *

><p>Tali and Garrus followed the Chief back through the freighter and past Fai Dan and Arcelia. This time, rather than heading up to the tower, they took a right and walked straight past the elevator Arcelia had told them about, which would take them up to the skyway.</p>

As they came upon and descended another set of stairs, John's motion sensor displayed two red targets closing in on them quickly. Barely a second later, the terrified scream of a woman echoed off the stone walls.

"Oh god, they're everywhere!"

The three of them saw the blonde colonist frantically trying to escape a pair of geth, until she was shot in the back and collapsed on the stairwell, dead. John caught one of the geth stalkers in mid-jump with a blast from his CAWS shotgun, the momentum sending the destroyed body crashing into the wall above their heads. Behind him, Garrus tossed a plasma grenade down the stairs, catching it onto the remaining geth trooper's curved head, detonating several seconds later and blowing it apart.

"Cortana, I need another weapon swap. Change out my Suppressor for the HBR," John requested inside his helmet. A moment later, the forerunner assault rifle was gone from his back, as the HBR took its place beside the fuel rod cannon. He swapped out the CAWS for the HBR before progressing the rest of the way down the stairs.

Moving past the next corner, John found himself in what had to be the lower levels of the utilities building. Below him was a large reservoir of water, and the rest of the building around him seemed to be a processing facility or the inside of a dam. "Cortana, how do I get the water supply back up and running?"

"There are three water valves that have to be reactivated to get the flow of water back up to the colony. Marking them for you now." Three orange NAV markers appeared in his HUD, labeled A, B, and C, with the first marker less than fifty meters from his current location. Following the marker led him down to the left, into a side passage, where he instantly had to take cover to avoid a pulse rocket shot over his head.

Down at the other end of the passage was a small group of geth, with the rocket trooper being the only significant threat. Just as Tali dived under a second rocket, rolling up to his right behind the low stone wall, John raised his HBR and put a 3-round burst through the rocket trooper's optics, dropping the geth unit.

The two geth troopers still firing at them were both destroyed by a single well-placed shot from Garrus's binary rifle, their bodies completely vaporized a moment later from the sniper rifle's effects. Once he'd confirmed the area was clear, John stepped over to the first water valve and brought his omni-tool up to bear, letting Cortana handle the process of reactivating it. It wasn't long before the valve's display read green across the board, as Cortana disengaged the water main's lockdown.

Moving towards the other end of the passage, John found the second water valve, and had Cortana reactivate it as well. He heard the sound of rushing water within the line, which was definitely a good sign.

"Chief, take a left here. From the faint energy readings I'm getting, this is the garage and something inside still has power."

John nodded, taking Cortana's advice and headed through the door. As soon as he stepped inside, a deep, rumbling growl came from above him, followed by a varren leaping down atop of him. He effortlessly threw the animal off of his back, before firing a shot through its skull to put it down.

Seeing his example, Garrus and Tali rushed through the doors, with two more varren leaping down and landing on the ground just in front of the entrance to the garage, missing them by only a few seconds.

The varren were large, reptilian-looking beasts that stood on four legs, with a thick grey hide running along the top of their bodies, while their undersides were a creamy white color. They had four long, curved fangs reminiscent of snakes, and their eyes were a pupil less orange color.

John, Garrus, and Tali started backing up against the far wall, as more and more varren started appearing from behind the rubble around them. Standing atop one of the burning vehicles was a varren larger than the others, with a blood red hide instead of the usual gray, which must have been the alpha.

As the varren started charging in at the group, Tali aimed her Scattershot towards the ground and fired, sending the projectiles bouncing up at an angle towards the oncoming predators. Three of them were killed when the projectiles shot up through their lower jaws and into their brains, while two more took hits to their belly, and were subsequently killed by a shot to the head each from Tali's Boltshot.

John had already swept the area in front of him with the HBR, leaving seven dead carcasses in front of him, riddled with bullet holes. The alpha started running for the SPARTAN while he was reloading, only to take a hit through the left eye from Garrus's binary rifle.

"With the alpha varren taken care of, the colonists should be able to restart their hunts. And hey, we even left them some fresh kills," Garrus remarked.

John glanced around the garage, spotting only two vehicles in the area, one of which was on fire, while the other was half buried under fallen rubble. They were large six-wheeled tanks, probably capable of carrying a small team inside. However, their design was inefficient, making them slow and difficult to control, which would have made them an easy target to take out. "Cortana, which one of these did you get the reading from?"

"The one above us. The one on fire," Cortana replied.

"Where would the power cells be stored inside this vehicle?" John asked.

"At the front, in a compartment underneath the Grizzly's lip," Garrus answered, having studied the history and mechanics of this vehicle once he learned that they were used in the First Contact War.

"I'll handle that," Tali volunteered, as she approached the vehicle and slid her hand across the flat metal surface of the tank's underside. Once she found the compartment, she managed to pry open the rusty door and found two power cells inside. One was obviously burned out and far beyond unusable, but the other remained intact, and as Cortana said, was still producing power. Ever so carefully, Tali pulled out the intact power cell and stored it in her equipment pouch, giving the Chief a thumbs up. "It's good to go."

"All that's left is the jamming device, and the third water valve," John said, as they left the garage. Without needing to be asked, Cortana dropped another, blue NAV marker in his HUD, which displayed the location of the jamming device, directly across from them. Though the third water valve was closer, proceeding to the valve first would place the device, and subsequently any geth guarding it, at their backs. Which meant, that it would be far safer and more convenient to take out the jamming device first.

Just before progressing through the next door, John held up his hand and signaled three enemy contacts to Garrus and Tali, who both nodded and took positions on opposite sides. Once they were ready, John opened the door and moved in, his eyes immediately spotting a pair of snipers above and a shock trooper behind a glowing, hexagonal shield.

Pulling out the fuel rod cannon, John arced a shot into the second level, destroying both snipers in an explosion of green plasma, while Garrus blew off the shock trooper's head, the deployable kinetic barrier not even slowing down the hard light projectile.

Their last opposition before reaching the jamming device were not geth, but a trio of krogan. John delivered two bursts to the chest and one to the head of one of the krogan, expecting that to be the end of it. Therefore, he was surprised when, instead of dying, the krogan simply roared in pain and started charging straight at him. He was about to roll to his left and avoid the charging behemoth, until a solid blue mass thrown by one of the other krogan slammed into his chest. Though it barely forced him to stagger, it managed to distract him and drop half of his shield bar in the process.

A moment later, the krogan he had previously shot slammed him into the wall, forcing John to drop his HBR, and taking down the rest of his shield's first layer. By now, the krogan had entered a state of blood rage, making him all the more dangerous. The state of blood rage first created a positive feedback loop within the krogan's brain, in which its adrenalin suppressed its serotonin, the chemical that induced serenity. The rage then shifted mental control away from the frontal lobes, responsible for reasoning, to the limbic system, responsible for aggression and survival. Because of that shift, along with a secondary nervous system and tertiary organs, krogans were able to fight while totally unresponsive to pain, and regardless of injury.

John caught the krogan's right fist as it tried to bash through his faceplate, and activated the hard light dagger in his right gauntlet. Before the krogan could attempt to strike him again with his left fist, John sent the dagger stabbing into the krogan's chest repeatedly, each strike inflicting more and more damage, taking out three of the krogan's four lungs, and one of its hearts.

The krogan roared in fury and stepped back, rearing its head as it planned to bash John's head in with its own thick skull. Waiting until the last second, John allowed the krogan to throw its head forward before bringing up the dagger, and letting the krogan impale itself upon the hard light weapon. It still struggled for a few seconds before it fell still, finally dead. John retracted the dagger and let his enemy fall to the ground.

He picked up his HBR and glanced over at Garrus and Tali to see how

they had fared. Tali had put a shot straight into its hump, also triggering a blood rage from her opponent. However, she sent out a combat drone to distract the less rational krogan while she simultaneously attacked it from behind. It had taken her the whole clip to put the krogan down, but she had done it without a physical confrontation.

Garrus on the other hand, had not given his enemy time to enter the blood rage. Two shots from the binary rifle, one through each eye, quickly put down the lone krogan biotic, even after it had already raised barriers around itself. "Are you alright Chief? I know a rampaging krogan is a hard enemy to put down, especially in close quarters."

"I'm fine. I wasn't expecting that biotic attack though," John said, relieved to see his shield recharging.

Garrus nodded in understanding, believing that the Chief had been thrown into the wall by the biotic attack. "Biotics are capable of producing mass effect fields strong enough to hurl objects and people around, usually with a minimum of 600 newtons of force. An asari biotic can break 1000 newtons, but a skilled krogan can still hit around 700 newtons."

Thankful to Dājā for the lessons on mathematics and science she had imparted to the SPARTANS, John did a quick conversion in his head, and realized that the krogan biotic had only hit him with about 157 pounds of force with that mass effect field. No wonder he'd barely felt it.

Stepping past the dead krogan, John found the active jamming device hidden away in an alcove. Reloading the clip in his fuel rod cannon, John retreated to a safe distance and unloaded a single shot into the main body of the device, completely obliterating it and leaving nothing but hot, melted scrap behind.

"That's the biggest problem taken care of," Tali said, reloading her Scattershot. "All that's left is to reactivate the last water valve, and then we can move on."

Heading back into the main area of the utilities building, Cortana's NAV marker led them into another side passage, filled with geth. John emptied the last four shots in the fuel rod cannon's clip down the passage, focusing on the large geth juggernaut and the pair of rocket troopers on either side of it. Once Tali had dropped the last geth trooper with her Boltshot, John had Cortana activate the final water main, sending water rushing through the system and back up to the colony.

"_Chief, I'm picking up a human life sign further ahead. Aside from a few erratic brain waves, all his vital signs are normal,"_ Cortana said through John's omni-tool.

"A colonist, maybe? But how could he have survived in an area crawling with geth?" Tali asked in confusion.

"Let's go ask," John said, as he continued on through the rest of the passage, spotting the colonist just ahead of them. "Are you from the colony? What are you doing down here?"

"Yes, my name is Ian. Ian Newstead. As for what I'm doing down here, nothing I should be and anything I shouldn't," Ian finished cryptically, only to groan in pain, clutching the sides of his head. "That was a good oneâ€| very intense."

"Are you alright? What's the matter?" Garrus asked.

Ian waved off the turian's concerns. "Nothing, just invoking the master's whip. It helps remind me I'm stillâ€| alive." Then he seemed to finally notice the state of the three people in front of him, especially the larger than normal, heavily armed and armored human. "You're here for the geth, aren't you? You're not the only one interested in thoseâ€| things."

"Who else is looking for the geth?" John asked.

Ian shook his head. "Not looking for; looking to get rid of," he corrected. "They're a thorn in the side of theâ€"arghâ€"!" Ian brought his hands back up to his head, hunched over and screaming, from what appeared to be a very painful headache.

Garrus narrowed his eyes in suspicion. It seemed to be a more extreme case of what he'd seen from that woman in the medbay and Fai Dan. He couldn't help but remember something his father had taught him from his years of experience in C-Sec. Once was an incident, twice was a coincidence. Three times was a pattern.

"T-trying to get to theâ€"aaiee!" Ian started, only to be cut off again from a spasm of pain. After about five seconds, the pain must have stopped, for Ian let out a short laugh, which became a sigh of relief.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" John asked, noticing that the pain seemed to increase the closer Ian got to revealing some piece of information.

"Help me? No. No one can help me now." Ian shook his head furiously. "I would rather die fighting."

"Fighting what?"

By now, sweat was freely running down Ian's face, showing how hard he was struggling. "Not that kind of fight. It's like running through a thorn bush. The more you struggleâ€| no, time's up. Ask Fai Dan. Ask him about theâ€"argh!"

As Ian once again suffered through a bout of pain, John, Tali, and Garrus started heading back through the tunnels. "Chief, something's not right here. I think those colonists are hiding something from us. If they don't pick and choose their words carefully, they'll experience pain, like a form of negative reinforcement."

"The closer they get to revealing anything, the more pain they experience," John added, agreeing with Garrus. "Cortana, you said you detected erratic brain waves from Ian. Did you detect anything artificial that might be causing them? Like a chip or an implant?"

"_Negative, Chief. The erratic brain waves I picked up were all natural. If someone is inflicting the pain on the colonists as

negative reinforcement, I can't figure out how it's being done."

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"We can ask Fai Dan about that man when we report in our success, but I doubt we'll get any real answers," Tali suggested.

"We've done what we can for the colony from here. If someone is doing this to them, it would have to be the geth. Colonists on Eden Prime said that during the attack, they were hearing a signal or a sound from inside their heads, one that caused them pain and made it difficult to think." John explained.

"_There's a geth ship latched directly onto the ExoGeni building. I can't destroy it without also destroying the building, and if I do, we might lose access to, or information about, whatever Saren found inside,"_ Cortana informed the trio.

That seemed to confirm John's theory. "Our priority is the ExoGeni building. We'll make a quick stop at the colony to report in, and then we'll head out."

* * *

><p>Chapter 5 is done. Originally, this was a lot longer, but I decided to split it up into two chapters instead of letting one chapter run on too long. Chapter 6 is already partially done, and should come out much faster than this one.</p>

Now, before anyone jumps down my throat about the Chief spending time to help the colonists, you should know that it's in character for him to do so.

"Although John has difficulty understanding the 'undisciplined' lifestyle of civilians, he is fiercely protective of their lives and humanity as a whole. The mass slaughter of civilians at the hands of the Covenant was enough to drive even the stoic John into a cold rage. After the massacre of Draco III, John and his Spartans remained on-site until every Covenant soldier responsible for the atrocity was dead." â€“ Halo wikia, John-117's personality section.

As always, read and review and please let me know of any spelling, grammar, or lore mistakes I might have made, and I'll correct them immediately. Thanks for reading.

End
file.